

NHPC, Overland, MO—1/14/18

"Come to See"

TEXTS: I Samuel 3: 1-20
John 1: 43-51

St. Louis has a bad reputation. We are in fly-over territory, stuck between the East Coast and the West Coast. Nobody ever stops here, unless they have to. We have one of the country's highest murder rates. Then there is Ferguson, a St. Louis suburb.

"I am from St. Louis!"

"Too bad!"

Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus, had a bad reputation. In our gospel lesson for this morning, prejudice against Nazareth is evident. Jesus was in the process of calling his disciples. Philip, who had already agreed to follow Jesus, told Nathanael that they had found the Messiah promised by the prophets. *It was Jesus of Nazareth!* Nathanael's first response was an emotional, gut reaction:

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

(John 1: 46.)

Nathanael was giving verbal expression to a commonly held prejudice: Nazareth was a worthless, no good town. Nathanael, of course, was wrong. Jesus was a good person, he was the Messiah, and he came from Nazareth. When Nathanael actually saw Jesus, he saw the error of his thinking and recognized him as a man of great wisdom, and healing power. He even proclaimed him Son of God.

"Seeing is believing" is one of the greatest truisms of life. Phillip said to Nathaniel, *"Come and see,"* and he did! *"Come and see."* are three of the most important in the Bible. The message is: *"Come and see for yourself. Jesus is the Messiah."*

This message is really an invitation. Someone experiences Jesus as the Savior and then they invite their friends to the same experience. This experience has powerful impact on human lives. People who accept this invitation to see Jesus often become more than spectators. In our gospel reading, Jesus engaged Nathanael in a conversation even as he was approaching to meet him.

During this conversation Nathanael came to the powerful conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah.. The experience of Jesus is more than seeing him, it is also to have a conversation with him. This experience will also be up close, more than a spectator sport. It will be an encounter with God's son who will demand a response and even commitment to God's work.

The invitation to come and see Jesus is spoken every day all over the world. And yet, many people resist the invitation. We are perplexed. Why do people resist this opportunity to experience the Savior? One of the reasons is suggested by today's lesson. Nathanael also resisted the invitation to see Jesus because Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, had a bad reputation.

How often do we dismiss the possibility that someone good can come from a bad

place? We prefer people who come from prestigious places. We reject other people who come from the wrong side of the track, or the wrong church, or the wrong ethnic group.

When this happens, we be missing an opportunity to invite people to know Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

All over world, prejudices prevent people from sharing their experiences of God and God's love. People throughout the world resist the invitation to come and see Jesus because they have prejudices against white, American Christians. And vice versa, American Christians have prejudices against certain kinds of people who we think aren't good enough. They don't come from the right part town or the right ethnic group or economic class.

So, we don't even bother to offer them the invitation to come and see Jesus.

We are missing opportunities to spread the message of Jesus Christ and his love for all people because we have preconceived prejudices about bad places and the people who live there.

Oddly enough, one of the most important themes of the Bible is that God often comes to bad places to find people who will be good. Our Old Testament lesson for this morning is an example. Shiloh is the setting for this scripture lesson. It was the site of God's holy temple and home of God's sacred priests. Unfortunately, the priests had been ignoring their sacred duties.

They were corrupt, greedy, and immoral.

Their immorality was all the much more severe because they had been entrusted with the sacred duty of maintaining the temple as a site of worship. Therefore, the city of Shiloh, the temple there, and the priests were marked for destruction. There was no hope for salvation. Shiloh was so corrupt that total elimination was the only answer. And yet, in the midst of all this corruption, today's lesson tells the story of how God spoke a good word in this city of corruption.

Let's review this story about Shiloh as told in I Samuel. Our scripture lesson for today is a report of God's first revelation to the prophet Samuel. Eventually, he became a great prophet and leader of Israel. At this time, he was living in the temple under the care of Eli, priest of the temple.

In today's lesson, Samuel and Eli was asleep in the temple. The Lord called out,

"Samuel."

Samuel ran to Eli, believing that Eli had called him.

But, Eli was sleeping. This happened three times before Eli figured out that it was God who was calling Samuel. Finally, Eli said to Samuel,

"Go lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

(I Samuel 3: 9.)

Eli was an old man. His eyesight was failing. As we learn from God's revelation to Samuel, Eli was the head of a family of corrupt priests. His sons were apparently the most corrupt, but Eli had been unable to restrain their evil.

His failing eyesight was a symbol of his failure to see the sin his sons were doing. Eli's failure to see this evil did not excuse his responsibility. Through God's revelation to Samuel, God promises destruction of Eli's entire family. and this is what happened. In the very next chapter, Israel was defeated in battle and all of Eli's sons were killed.

Back to story of God's calling to Samuel.

Even though he was to become one of the greatest prophets of Israel, he was not able to understand that God was speaking to him. We might say that his ears were clogged. He heard, but did not understand that God was speaking. It was Eli who realized what was happening and then told Samuel what to do.

Eli was an old man with bad eyesight. He was the father of a corrupt family marked for destruction.

Nonetheless, Eli knew that it was God speaking to Samuel. Eli instructed Samuel so that Samuel could receive a message from God. In the midst of evil corruption, a good thing happened: God spoke to Samuel. True, it was a message of judgment and destruction. Nonetheless, this episode established an important link between God and Samuel. This relationship would serve Israel well. With God's guidance, Samuel would become one of Israel's greatest leaders.

However, our focus today is on Eli. He was a less than perfect priest. He was the father of a corrupt family.

Nonetheless, God worked through him to create goodness. Eli even accepted his fate when God's revelation to Samuel foretold the destruction of his family. After hearing about his family's destiny, he said,
"It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

(I Samuel 3: 18.)

We surely marvel at such a paradoxical, old man. He was blind and unable to stop his family's corruption. And yet, he was able to guide Samuel to his first encounter with God.

He was also willing to accept his fate, a quality sadly lacking in many people today.

Despite his dim vision, he had a sharp sense of how God works in the world. His experience also reminds us that the invitation to "come and see" does not necessarily involve actual vision. After all, Eli was nearly blind. But, he was able to "see" that God was present in a temple city with a bad reputation to call Samuel as prophet..

This episode also reminds us God come to people who live in bad circumstances. God come into their situations with a message: You can emerge from this bad place as a servant and prophet for God.

Are we willing to "come and see" a prophet from God, even if it means going to a bad place? As Christians, we surely believe God is working everywhere, transforming corrupt and evil places, and bringing salvation to all people.

Are we willing to overcome prejudices that prevent us from telling good news to everyone everywhere? Do we really believe that the good news can be heard by people who live in bad places? Are we willing to go to bad places, like the inner city slums of St. Louis, to preach the good news?

For many different reasons, we resist preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to all people everywhere. Let's resolve in this new year to overcome our fears and prejudices and extend to the invitation to all people whoever they are and wherever they live to come and see Jesus.

Let us pray.

"Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations for ever and ever." AMEN.