

January 17, 2021  
The Second Sunday after Epiphany  
Year B  
John 1:43-51  
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church  
Zoom Worship during the Coronavirus Pandemic  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### Seen and Known

Seventeen years ago, on this very Sunday in the church year, the Second Sunday after Epiphany, I was part of what is called a pulpit “round robin” what was organized by the Brookfield Clergy Group that I was a part of through my last church, Prince of Peace in Brookfield, Connecticut. There were five churches that were participating in the “round robin”. The Roman Catholic church sent its priest to preach at the Presbyterian church. The Presbyterian church’s pastor went to preach at the Episcopal church. The Episcopal church’s pastor went to preach at the Congregational Church. The Congregational church’s pastor went to preach at my church, the Lutheran church, and I went to preach at the Roman Catholic church.

As many of you know, I was part of a dual pastor ministry in Connecticut and the other pastor was a man. We had a very carefully laid out preaching schedule, and the Sunday of the Pulpit “Round Robin” was a Sunday that I was scheduled to preach. We didn’t even discuss which one of us would go to the Roman Catholic Church. It was my turn to preach so I went to preach.

It started out a little bit awkwardly when I looked at the bulletin and saw these words “We welcome Pastor Mark Nordskog, pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, as our guest preacher today as part of our Brookfield Clergy Pulpit Exchange.” I started my sermon with these words, “Forest Gump said, ‘Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get.’” And then I explained why I was there instead of Pastor Mark.

That hurdle over, I started my carefully prepared sermon. But it didn't take long before I was very uncomfortable about how the sermon was being received. The huge sanctuary was packed, but the whole time that I was preaching the congregation was...the best way I can describe it was that it felt like they were inattentive. People were in constant motion, fiddling with their bulletins, rooting through their purses, giving things to their children, rustling, moving, sometimes even whispering to the people they were sitting with in their pews.

Like I said, it was this Sunday in the church year, the Second Sunday after Epiphany in year B, so the gospel was the same gospel that we have today. The story of Jesus, gathering two of his first four disciples, Philip and Nathanael. In that story, Nathanael was called to meet Jesus by Philip who told him "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth" (John 1:45b). Nathanael's response to this astonishing news was to doubt, even to scoff. He said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

While I was preaching there was a part of my mind that was wondering. "Is this congregation having the same reaction to me being up here preaching as Nathanael had to the news that Philip had found the Messiah and that he was from Nazareth? Are they thinking, 'Can anything good come out of the Lutheran Church? Why should I listen to a sermon preached by a Lutheran? And a Lutheran woman? Where's my priest, a real priest? How long is this going to last?'"

I remember very clearly thinking about halfway through the sermon, "If I just stopped preaching now, in the middle of a sentence, and said "Amen", they would probably not even notice."

I didn't do that, of course. I carried on and finished the sermon and then I went back gratefully went back to my seat for the rest of the worship service. The associate pastor of the church was leading the liturgy, and, of course, presiding at

communion, so I participated as much as I could in the rest of worship and, when the mass was over, the associate pastor invited me to join in the “handshake line”.

I’ll admit, I was a little bit uncomfortable about doing it. I didn’t want to put people in the awkward position of having to smile and be friendly to someone whose sermon they had clearly not liked, but there was no way that I could refuse the handshake line without being incredibly rude so I joined the priest by the door of the sanctuary and prepared to shake hands.

People were nice. Very nice. Many of them gave me the typical handshake and good morning, but they were all smiling. No one glowered at me. Many of them thanked me for coming. Some of them commented how nice it was to see a woman in the pulpit. Some of them asked me to tell my congregation thanks for sharing me for that Sunday. Many of them said that they had enjoyed the sermon.

I’ll admit, while I was still wondering about the lack of attention while I was preaching, I was feeling much better about the experience. After the handshake line was over, the priest also thanked me for coming and mentioned how much people had seemed to enjoy the sermon. But it was the organist who really opened my eyes. While I was getting my things together and ready to leave, he came up to me and told me how much he had enjoyed the sermon and how impressed I was by the way that I had captured the congregation’s attention. I almost laughed out loud, but then he went on. He said, “They were hanging on your every word. I’ve never seen them so riveted by a sermon. You could have heard a pin drop in here while you were preaching.”

I thanked him and headed out to my car, where, before I started driving, I just sat and laughed. The problem had never been the congregation, it had been my expectations. Faced with an unfamiliar group, and starting off knowing that they were expecting someone else, someone who looked more like people they were used to seeing in the pulpit, I had allowed my own insecurities to color the

experience, to put up a dividing wall between me and the people hearing my sermon.

But in spite of that, in spite of my assumption that we were at odds, those people at St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church in Brookfield, Connecticut helped show me the way to Jesus. I saw Jesus in their community. In spite of the fact that it turned out that I was the one with the problem, the one with the attitude, the one who could have been accused of judging them by imagining that I knew what they thought of me, they welcomed me, appreciated the gifts I had shared with them, and sent me on my way rejoicing that we had been able, across denominational lines and church culture lines, to see Jesus in each other and to share Jesus with each other.

The experience that I had with them could be seen as very similar to the experience that Nathanael had with Jesus. Once Nathanael actually gives in to Philip's invitation to "Come and see" and goes to meet Jesus, Nathanael and Jesus have this interaction:

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." (John 1:47-48)

If Jesus knew that Nathanael had been sitting under the fig tree by some kind of supernatural means, he probably also knew what Nathanael had said about him to Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But that's not what Jesus chose to focus on about Nathanael. He didn't look at him and see the worst of him. Instead, Jesus looked at Nathanael and he praised him. He said, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" (John 1: 47b)

This gospel reading is all about Jesus finding people, finding them physically and also finding the truth of them. Jesus found Philip and Philip found Nathanael, so that Nathanael could be found by Jesus as well, so that Nathanael could find himself as one of Jesus's followers.

Through my sermon and through their welcome, a case could be made that Jesus found us all in that morning's worship service.

And what about us, what about today, when there is so much about which we could be disdainful, when there is so much about which we could question, "Can anything good come out of....and you fill in the blank, with whatever you've critiqued in recent week. Here are some critiques that I've heard myself just in this this past week:

Can anything good come out of the media?

Can anything good come out of social media?

Can anything good come out of that person's mouth?

Can anything good come out of online worship?

Can anything good come out of that political party?

Can anything good come out of that other political party?

Can anything good come out of this year, which has already gotten off to such a rocky start?

The list goes on and on and on; our skepticism, our sense of isolation from each other, our sense that maybe this year, which started with such high hopes, that things just might start getting better, will be just another series of disasters, might make it hard to feel like Jesus can find us.

Jesus who knows the truth of our hearts, our worries, fears, our exhaustion, our prejudices, can he find us in this mess? Especially when we can't be together in the way that we want to be, yearn to be; when we can't be in space that we have

come to think of as holy ground, when we can't sing together, when the communion that we share is in small groups of people who can't be together for too long, not the community that we love gathered around Christ's table, when we wonder how much more of this we can take.

The story of Nathanael tells us, "yes." Jesus, knows everything about us. He knows our doubts, our fears, our grief, our weaknesses, our selfishness, our loneliness. He knows what we're going through. And he also knows our hopes, our strength, our wisdom, our courage, our patience, our joy.

As the psalm for today says,

"He knows our sitting down and our rising up;

He discerns our thoughts from afar.

He traces our journeys and our resting-places

and is acquainted with all our ways.

Indeed, there is not a word on our lips,

but he, our Lord, knows it altogether" (Psalm 139:2-4 paraphrased).

Jesus who knows the truth of us the mistakes, the failures the fears, looks at us and loves us. And he comes for us, he seeks us and he finds us, in ways we might not be able to imagine. In communities where we find an unexpected welcome. In people who differ from us, but who we find that we can still love. In Zoom worship, where we find, that in spite of the ways that sickness has separated us, we are still together, the body of Christ, singing songs, and listening to scripture and sermons as bread for the journey, and praying for the world, and loving one another through our screens listening to each other's stories and sharing each other's burdens. He finds us in moments of connection over the phone, or over a screen or in a card or a note written, sent, and read. He finds us when we're alone, in moments of

comfort, in a peace that passes all understanding, in a calm assurance that tells us that he is with us.

Jesus knew Nathanael. He knew everything about him, the good and the bad, and he welcomed him, he named the good in him, and he claimed him as his follower, his disciple, his friend.

And Jesus knows us, knows everything about us, and Jesus welcomes us, sees and names the good in us, invites us to healing and repentance of all that separates us from fellowship with others and faith in God, and claims us as his followers, his disciples, his friends. Thanks be to God. Amen.