

The Rev. Dr. Lisa Cressman
Year B, Second Sunday after the Epiphany
14 January 2024
For The Episcopal Church in Minnesota
John 1:43-51

Do you prefer squash or potatoes?

I do love potatoes, especially Yukon gold that are mashed with milk and butter and topped with salt and pepper, all golden and fluffy, warm and satisfying.

That said, though, if I have to choose, I'll pick squash, especially if it's butternut squash soup, my absolute favorite. I make a pot just about every week of the winter, sautéing chunks of it with onions, carrots, apples, and spices, then adding broth and pureeing it until smooth. The final step is to stir in whole milk, heating it through to make that creamy, orange-colored, slightly sweet deliciousness that warms the winter right out of my chilly bones. Ahhh.....

What about you? Which do you prefer? Squash or potatoes?

Why do I care, you may wonder? Because squash and potatoes have absolutely nothing to do with today's gospel. And absolutely everything.

In today's gospel, Philip had an encounter with Jesus, and Philip realizes that Jesus was the Messiah they had all been waiting for. Jesus was the one Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Amos and all the other prophets wrote about. Philip is so excited that he runs to share the news with his good friend who has also been waiting for the Messiah.

But what was Nathanael's response to Philip's incredible news? "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Dude! What were you thinking?!

Let's put Nathanael's comment in context. Let's say that Nathanael was a rabid Minnesota Vikings football fan who hated his next door rival team, the Green Bay Packers. Philip has just told Nathanael that the Vikings pummeled the Packers in the Super Bowl. Furthermore, Philip tells Nathanael the Most Valuable Player's name who led the Vikings to their victory. However, the MVP happened to have been traded that year from...the Packers.

Nathanael, though, rather than jump up and down over the Viking's glorious win and the Packers' crushing defeat, because of the MVP's history with the Packers responds glumly, "Can anything good come from Green Bay?"

Oh, Nathanael. To Nathanael, nothing good could come from a player like that, not his fair play or sportsmanship, not his lightning fast reflexes, not his team leadership. Because nothing good could come from Green Bay, Nathanael wouldn't ask questions, like why the player was made MVP. He wouldn't trust the evidence of the MVP's brilliant plays that were displayed in front of millions.

When Nathanael said to Philip "Can anything good come from Nazareth" he dismissed the possibility that Jesus might be who Philip claimed him to be, because Nazareth, a backwater small town was by default incapable of producing a godly man or brilliant rabbi, let alone the Messiah.

In fact, Nathanael was already so convinced that he not only didn't ask questions, he didn't even think of Jesus as a human being. Nathanael asked whether any *thing* good could come from Nazareth. Jesus was a *thing*. An object. A straw man, a mannequin, a two-dimensional picture of what something that came from Nazareth would have to be: something uneducated, unsophisticated, uncultured, something that could be dismissed and looked down on, even by God. Nothing beautiful, helpful, sacred or loving could come from Nazareth. Not a child of God. Certainly not the Son of God.

Without evidence Nathanael was certain what Jesus couldn't be — and that is what we are also hearing we should be certain about as well. We are hearing through news outlets and social media and from those in the public eye that we should be certain that no good thing can come from the "Nazareths" of our day. We are told that no good thing can come from those who come from another country, or speak another language, or practice another religion or hold another point of view.

We are told to not see those from Nazareth as rich, complex human beings, but as some *thing* less than we are. We are told to distance ourselves from the possibility of a connection. We are told to not see those from Nazareth as a *who* but treat them as a *what*, even though they are children of God whom God calls very good.

When we say that nothing good can come from Nazareth, we disrespect God's creation by trampling on people's humanity, their stories, their uniqueness. We refuse to believe God works in them through acts of compassion, or loving their kids like we do, or giving generously to a fault.

We declare that to be impossible even when the testimony is overwhelming, even when the evidence is handed to us on a silver platter. It leads us to be unwilling to ask the most basic of questions to learn who they are.

Now, to Philip's credit, he didn't argue with Nathanael. He didn't defend Jesus, or try to persuade or convince Nathanael of anything. Instead, all he said was, "come and see." Come and see for yourself. Gather your own evidence. Decide for yourself rather than believe what others have told you about people from Nazareth. Test your assumptions against your experience with the person himself.

And to Nathanael's credit, he did go and see for himself. Challenging his assumptions could not have been comfortable or fun because it isn't for any of us — because we might find and have to admit that our assumptions were wrong — like Nathanael did.

Credit is also due to Jesus who didn't bring up just how wrong Nathanael had been. Jesus didn't blame or shame. He didn't call Nathanael out or even say, "Dude, what were you thinking?"

Rather, Jesus welcomes Nathanael, praises him, draws him in, connects with him. And this evidence that Nathanael saw for himself, the experience of Jesus as a full, complex, nuanced, three-dimensional human being — and Messiah — who happened to have come from Nazareth — changed Nathanael's mind. And his life.

I imagine after this Nathanael never again said "Can anything good come from Nazareth," but human nature being what it is he probably heard it from others. And when he did he probably responded, "Hey, I get it. I used to think that too. Come and see for yourself."

It takes courage to go and see for ourselves the children of God who come from "Nazareth." We can do so by seeing them in person, or by reading books or watching movies that let us experience their stories and how they arrived at their points of view. It doesn't mean we'll agree with them, it doesn't mean we *have* to agree with them, but it will change us and it will change the world when we no longer see them as a two-dimensional cut out of our assumptions, but as a fellow child of God, loved, forgiven, and still finding their way like we are.

Which brings me back to why preferring squash or potatoes matters so much precisely because squash and potatoes do not matter at all.

Neither squash or potatoes are the symbol of any sports teams, political parties, or nations. They don't have political action committees promoting them. As far as I know, they aren't the subject of social media fights, no one has been "canceled" because they preferred one over the other, and the Supreme Court has never taken up a case that ended up with one vegetable winning over the other. Squash and potatoes aren't cultivated with emotional fertilizer. For a person to prefer squash or potatoes is simply a nuance of being a human being.

When we realize that we're having feelings because someone comes from Nazareth, we can wonder whether they prefer squash or potatoes. This is a suggestion I adapted from Scott Shigeoka's book *Seek: How Curiosity Can Change Your Life and Transform the World**. Even just *imagining* whether a person prefers squash or potatoes puffs air into the two-dimensional figure we created and inflates them into three-dimensional human beings with taste buds, and a whole life story.

It's human nature to wonder whether anything good can come from the Nazareths of our day. When we do, though, God will transform us and transform the world when we go and see for ourselves whether they prefer squash or potatoes.

*Shigeoka, Scott. *Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World*. Grand Central Publishing (New York), 2023. Kindle Edition.