



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Epiphany 2

January 17, 2021

Invisible to Indispensable

John 1:43–51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹ And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

A precious vase tips over. In slow motion it’s falling. Pottery collapses into parts and pieces. Fragments disintegrate and go everywhere. Now what? Gasp, swear, weep, sweep them up and throw them away? Or track each shard down, gather the slivers together, and reconstruct a more beautiful vase than before? The Japanese call it “kintsugi” – “golden rejoining.” No, don’t use an undetectable adhesive or try to cement the ceramic so that no one will notice. An artist bonds the bits back together using a golden resin. The new seams glint and shimmer. A river of richness runs throughout the fractures, turning defects into features. Adept fingers craft a sculpture out of a ruptured container. What once was merely fine china will be known from this moment on as uniquely Japanese. Sometimes they even shatter glassware on purpose.

“We have found Jesus of Nazareth.” Now what? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Pathetic, potsherd Nazareth? The ancients never indicate a Nazareth. Scrutinize the sacred scrolls in vain for Nazareth. The maps inside the front and back flaps don’t bother with Nazareth. The prophets point to Jerusalem, the rabbis speak of Bethlehem, not Nazareth. Even the atheists’ documents don’t mention Nazareth. It looks like a microscopic clump of huts scattered and accidentally deposited on an obscure hillside. It just lies there being an obstacle and hindrance on your way to somewhere significant. That non-place has stagnated and impoverished itself into a persistent vegetative state, an undue burden of a speck too small to qualify for calling it a town and too weak to take care of itself.



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You see how such a broken-down, backwards intruder consumes already limited resources and contributes little to human civilization. You know respectable folks are waiting for it to die and wishing they could get rid of it. You can't have any real kind of life in Nazareth. You're talking about Galilee of the Gentiles, that pagan pockmark on the Holy Land, parasite and tumor disfiguring our rightful private territory. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Don't force your Nazareth on me!

Can anything good come from a surprise pregnancy? Can anything good come out of a terminal diagnosis? Can anything good come with a disability? You almost can't detect any shreds of humanity left in those conditions. Their jagged edges just make the imperfections and deficiencies all the more obvious. Those situations have scuffed-up surfaces that don't give off enough gloss for our comfort, not yet anyway or not anymore. Couldn't somebody just brush or nudge them under the rug or fridge or stove somewhere out of sight?

Well, if not, if comfort must escape us, then let's take control. Sort those ruined specks of life by size and divide them into piles. Categorize, isolate, and disqualify the ones that don't meet the desired measure of pretty, presentable, productive, popular, prosperous, or powerful on our subjective gemological grading scale. And dress up a dustpan with delicate euphemisms for unjust killing – like “abortion,” “embryo experimentation,” or “physician-assisted suicide” – to lessen our disgust as we discard them. They won't suitably serve for assembling and engineering our uniform utopia. Nothing was coming from them but suffering. All the culture's horses and all the media's men couldn't put those scraps together. Who would even want to?

Methinks we doth protest too much! We end up like Nathanael in our text. He dismissed Nazareth but he himself came from a settlement just like it on the other side of the tracks. Those sinful twins, pride and dread, occupy our hearts and cloud our eyes. We sense our own insignificance. And it compels us to compare, compete, complain, criticize, and keep score. At the same time, it cuts us down to similar size. And though in our brokenness we sneer, “No, you!”, it takes one to know one. Human means divided. Human means dependent. Human means pieces and particles, fractions and granules, every one of us and each one of you. Human means impaired and unable. We all consist of the same stuff, flung across the floor of a great big planet and tumbled under the fringes of a vast history. We've long since ceased even aspiring to amount to anything more than the kings and queens of crumbs. Can anything good come out of this fallen world at all? Can anything good come from sinful flesh like ours?

Yet something summons us: “Come and see.” And Someone keeps beckoning, “Come and see.” In each new human individual: “Come and see.” With every additional instant of our existence, “Come and see.” In every pulse that still throbs after our disobediences: “Come and see what good!” With every breath that fills these lungs even after our wickedness: “Come and see how good!” “Jesus” means “Come and see that from invisible comes indispensable!”



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Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Out of Nazareth comes a Father's compassion. Out of Bethlehem comes Immanuel. Out of Galilee comes God-with-us. "Come and see Jesus!" Out of an embryo in a maiden womb comes unconditional acceptance for us. Out of peasantry comes empathy for all. Out of humility comes help for everyone. "Come and receive Jesus!" Out of His servanthood comes our salvation. Out of His suffering comes your substitute. Out of His affliction comes your atonement. Out of His crucifixion comes your forgiveness. "Come and believe Jesus!" Out of His wounds comes welcome for the weakest of us. Out of His disabling of Himself with our diseases comes reconciliation. Out of His dying from our defects comes resurrection.

The Almighty Maker takes His place among us. He stands beside the shards and slivers. The Lord our God laces and lacquers our nature with His own golden vein of gentle love and tender devotion. He reaches the broken and the abandoned. He touches the afraid and the ashamed. Jesus gathers the endangered into His thick mercy. He attaches them with His rich grace. This God wants each and every one for His vessel, whatever their age or appearance or ability. He ladles them full with words of pardon, with water of promise, with wafer and wine of presence. And He serves up the sparkle of His Kingdom. He serves up the gleam of His own family. God Himself has opened heaven everlasting at the sharp edges of our fractures, right into our cracks and creases, and Christ's divine descending to the earth elevates humankind's own ascending to glory. Shall we not trust this rather than trash it? Indeed, let us rest in this reality, to our good, to our common good, and to our whole and highest good!

And out of a surprise pregnancy comes purpose. It belongs to the Lord Jesus. Out of a terminal diagnosis comes fellowship, and out of a disability comes community, because the Lord Jesus created each person. Out of dependency comes blessing, and out of deficiency comes innovation, because the Lord Jesus redeemed all people. Out of impairment comes improvement, and out of weakness comes comfort, because the Lord Jesus calls them to be God's own temple and a treasure forever. This makes humankind amazing, miraculous even, that out of invisible comes indispensable.

A man from the East used to fetch water in clay jars. He'd hang them from either end of a staff he hoisted across his shoulders. Every day he hauled them down to the stream, filled them, and heaved them back to his house. But one of the jars had cracks and would leak terribly. Each day when he arrived home, it was almost empty. This brought the jar shame and sadness. In fact, as he wept out his payload, he apologized for his failures to the master. The master paused for a moment, then patiently explained: "I am well aware of your flaws. Do you notice your side of the path? I planted there on purpose. And out of your flaws have come beautiful flowers!"

The more apparent a person's inadequacies, the more evident is the grace of God. The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are, on the contrary, indispensable. If one member suffers, all suffer together, and if one member is honored, all rejoice together. For God has so composed and arranged the members according to His superior wisdom and



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delight. May God equip us to be Gospel-motivated voices for Life – for this kind of life with this kind of God. And may He enable us to declare that with courage and demonstrate it with compassion, until what our Savior has in mind for us all eclipses every loss and any gain that ever came before. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

A sermon by Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director of Mission and Ministry, Lutherans For Life, was used as the basis for this message.