

## Can Anything Good Come From THAT Place?

1 Samuel 3:1-10' John 1:43-51

Colchuck Lake is a very special spot in the Alpine Wilderness of Washington State. It's a ten mile strenuous hike to this beautiful lake, and it's a spot I have loved my whole life. When we were children, My Dad used to get us up at dawn and make our way there to backpack to that place of singular beauty. It's such a beloved place, that Dad's ashes are scattered near there. If I close my eyes, I can easily get there even though it's been about 30 years since I have.

A sense of place, of rootedness, and of grounding is something we all do. There are places that define us, places we return to, and places from which we also flee. On Facebook this week, I asked people where their "place" was that gave them grounding and belonging, places we go to or return to

when we need them. Some of those places were wonderful to hear about: Being amongst trees, on the water, walking in newly fallen snow, kayaking the Chippewa River, living in your childhood home, and family meeting at Irvine Park for gatherings, amongst many places.

This sense of place leads not only to belonging or a lack there of, but also of identity. The moment you tell someone what place you are from, there can be a thought process that begins, perhaps of interest or wondering, but also of judgement, or assumptions. Let's just take a moment to check in with ourselves when I mention some places. What goes through your minds as I mention them:

- Eau Claire
- Northern Wisconsin
- Washington DC
- San Francisco
- China
- Bayfield, Wisconsin
- New York City

The judgement, excitement, or reaction to “place” is really relevant in today’s Gospel reading from the first chapter of John. First, we hear that Jesus decides to go to Galilee, a place that was renowned to be a melting pot of various cultures, specifically of Greek and Roman cultures. A large population of Jews resided there as well and it was a very important fishing port on Sea of Galilee.

Although they would have attempted to avoid the secular cultures as much as possible, the Jews who resided there were still likely to have been affected by those cultures. They would have been more educated, more prosperous. There, we hear that Jesus meets Phillip, who is from Bethsaida, also a town that primarily known for fishing. In these places, Jesus comes, calling his first disciples, calling them from that place to a new one.

So, we shouldn’t be too surprised when Nathaniel, an upright Jew, is skeptical of a person coming from Nazareth, especially someone whose brother touts as the Messiah. Nazareth is a little town that is on a trade route. It is a town that is on the way from or to somewhere but not a destination. It’s not a town where people go on purpose necessarily unless they need to stop there for something. So, right off the bat, Nathaniel applies his sense of place to the identity of another person. How could anything good come from THAT place?

Of course, a moment later, when Jesus displays his omniscient ability to Nathaniel by seeing him under the fig tree, all the skepticism fades. And, indeed, so does the concept of place. From then on, the place of the disciples will not be where they are from or even what they do, but their place will be as people of the Way, a community of

believers in a person. And, that person, that place becomes grounded in Jesus Christ, will be their rootedness and their belonging. Indeed, Nathaniel was about to experience more than being seen under a fig tree. Christ will become for him a “place”, a home that he and all the disciples will give their lives to.

This week, when pouring over this Gospel reading, I kept coming back to that skeptical phrase of Nathaniel - “Can anything good come from Nazareth”? Can anything good come from THAT place? I kept going back to it because I relate to this sense of place very much today. Right now, in a pandemic, our place, our rootedness has been challenged. Our place as Americans and especially as Christians who claim to be Evangelical Lutherans, what is our place supposed to be up and against the temptation to make Jesus in our own image rather than

the reverse, to make Jesus a part of our PLACE, instead of the other way around? How will we face this time?

Even here, in this beautiful sanctuary, even with a new camera system, of seeing your pastor again in this place, the pulpit, we have come face to face with the reality that this space is not what makes us rooted. Our place is not this building, although we love this building. And, we love the hands that built it and care for it. We love the beautiful woodwork of this grand sanctuary. We feel at home here. However, our place, our identity as St. John’s Lutheran Church is not this furniture, these hymnals, this brilliant stained glass and glorious woodwork; although we love the beauty of this place and we long to be here.

The pandemic has shown that our true place is in community together, in ministry with each other.

And right now, that people is a living people connected on Facebook Live and today in the parking lot for communion and at the TV for our Together in God ministry at 10:30AM. If our place in community together was only about the building, we would have dissolved by now. We never would have survived! You can close the building, but that doesn't change our community belonging to each other, because ultimately, that belonging is rooted to the person of Jesus Christ.

This is so essential today, dear siblings in Christ. As the church, we especially have to root ourselves together into the place of Christ and resist the need to polarize into our easy places of political world views that have taken us away from each other. As the Wisconsin Council of Churches states in their most recent dialog on when it really is safest to begin to return to an in person community reality,

they urge and caution us with the following plea to depolarize:

“We are all living through a time of trauma, having leapt from crisis to crisis, whether our attention is dominated by the recurrent surges of COVID, the enduring brokenness of racism and white supremacy, economic distress, or political violence. Wisconsin is one of the most polarized states in the nation. The response to the COVID pandemic has been politicized. And we are weary. Our mental health and our spirits are frayed from a year of physical distancing and dis-ease. When you put these realities together, maintaining a commitment to healthy interactions and communication is extraordinarily challenging.”

And, yet, healthy decisions in this time will require a great deal of courage to step into the unknown that is before us as

the community of Christ, a community steeped and planted in the teachings of the Gospel of Peace.

But, regardless of where any of us come from or find ourselves to be today, as Lutherans we confess that we know of two “places” where Christ is truly present, where he promises always to be: the sacraments and the Word of God. He is in the bread we break and the wine we share today at our curbside communion or right after this worship service at 9:15 on Facebook.

He is in the water that is poured each time we baptize and at every day when we rise to a new day, beginning each day new through baptism. He is in the scriptures, where even on the worst days, we can look to for guidance and hope. We can always find God there in these places. Furthermore, we can find the presence of God in all the creation around us. God is present

with us in our lying down and our going out, in our walking in the woods, in our fishing in the boat. The presence of God is in every place that God created, because that place is rooted in the one who created it, who was in the beginning with God the Father, Jesus Christ.

So, whether you are from Eau Claire, Seattle, Altoona, Strum, Minneapolis or Nazareth, it doesn't matter. For we are rooted together to the Tree of Life, the Christ, the one who has promised never to leave us and who has knit us together as one body, a body that is up for the challenges of spreading the love of God in a hurting world. Together, let us roll up our sleeves, continuing to follow the One for whom the angels ascend and descend, unifying the divided while keeping accountable to justice all who claim the same place of Jesus. May this be so in our lives. Amen.