

"Can Anything Good Come from *There*?"
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First Church of East Hartford
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Please Note: These are notes to a lively sermon, hopefully more akin to poetry or spoken word than a lecture or academic paper. Physical movement and delivery cannot be captured on the page, but I hope this gives you a glimpse of what was shared in worship.

This Sunday we begin a 4-week series on asking questions.
Each week the sermon will be inspired by a central question asked in the day's scripture.
This Sunday we start with Nathanael's question of bewilderment and judgment about where one can expect to find the Messiah.
I invite you to consider where you expect to find God,
and where you have been surprised by God.

PRAYER

This morning we have two stories of people being surprised by God.

[Genesis 28:10-17]

Jacob, fleeing from home, sleeps on the road, with nothing but a stone for his head.
Dreams of a ladder reaching to heaven, angels going up and down.
The voice of God promises a future to the fugitive.
He awakes and realizes he is sleeping on holy ground:
"Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!"
Jacob discovers God in a rocky place by the side of the road,
more specifically, he discovers a bridge that connects earth and heaven,
the holy and the everyday. {cover picture}

[John 1:43-51]

Nathanael can't believe anything as holy as the Messiah can come from a lowly town like Nazareth.
Philip invites him to come and see,
and Nathanael is blown away when he meets Jesus.
Jesus seems to know him in a way most strangers do not.
Nathanael proclaims,
"rabbi, you are the Son of God!"

In the Gospel of John the term "**Son of God**"
describes how Jesus is a bridge between humanity and divinity;
Jesus is a new sort of Jacob's ladder
a place where earth and heaven meet,
divine and human collide,
temporal mixes with the eternal.

It is exactly in those places - where earth and heaven meet - that God surprises us.

**Where do we see the divine and human collide today?
Where does God show up and surprise us?**

I took an informal survey in Northampton:

- nature, cosmos
- mornings
- driving in the country

this is good news, because the natural world is all around us:
the sun rises and sets everyday!
we have the chance to connect to God every day

a stunning sunset, or a quiet walk in the winter woods totally fills my soul
and I'm often left standing in awe of creation,

But,

to be honest, I expect to find God in nature,
In the woods I wouldn't say I'm *surprised*, I'm in awe, but not surprised.

I'm surprised when God uses people in the midst of rather mundane occurrences.

In our biblical stories:

- God promises Jacob a nation of descendants:
Jacob, who is fleeing after stealing the most valuable asset his bro. had
- God promises to show a great things to Nathanael:
Nathanael, a critic who put down Jesus's less than stellar neighborhood.

These stories remind me that...

God works through everyday, real people in unexpected ways.

When I lived in New Haven, I lived in a "bad" neighborhood:

"bad" was what the white people said so that they didn't sound racist.
often "bad" was linked to a warning about crime, but
the neighborhood didn't have more crime than the "nice" neighborhood,
it just had more black people.

Well, my new neighborhood was having a block party:

- bouncy house
- hot dogs, drinks, a big long grill set up on the sidewalk
- big speakers threaded through the living room windows
- dancing.

really good dancing. I love to dance, but I was totally intimidated.

I wanted to go meet my neighbors, but I was nervous as could be.

They looked so cool and they knew each other (folks had lived there for generations).

I was worried I was breaking into a tight-knit club.

I paced back and forth, peaked out my window, called my mom, hemmed and hawed,
and finally went out.

Before I could really speak, a drink was in my hand and a burger was on the grill for me.

I sat cautiously on the side chatting with the women,
eying the dancers.

They nudged and off I went, cautiously moving towards the dancers.

The teenagers pulled me in and taught me a few moves.

I can't exactly say I rocked it, but I had a good laugh and a great time.

It was a simple welcome,
but I saw God in the hospitality of my neighbors,
in the willingness to teach me to dance
and the warmth they showed me.

God works in those simple ways -
using hard rocks, small towns, and block parties

God uses these somewhat mundane things to help us realize how loved and cherished we are.

God uses earthly vessels and normal humans to show us extravagant love.
The bridge between the human and divine, between heaven and earth,
is in our vision.

Jesus was divine and human even before Nathanael proclaimed such,
but Nathanael needed to open his eyes to really see it.

May we be open to the surprises God has in store for us.

May we go and explore unexpected places looking for God's presence.

May God surprise you this week.

Amen.