



Where Are You From? Part 2  
Sermon by Deacon Heather Feltman  
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles  
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As we have mentioned the last couple of weeks, it is our hope through this sermon series to make room for intentional conversation in our life together as community, so we might grow in relationship with one another. It is our hope that the questions posed in this series will guide us in learning each other's stories.

In today's gospel reading, we look in on the unlikeliest of meetings. Talk about a relationship starting out of nothing! Nathanael doesn't even want to meet this guy named Jesus. Nathanael is just doing it as a favor for his friend Phillip. We can just imagine what Nathanael is thinking, "Let's get real, I mean, honestly? The one of whom the prophets spoke? Some self-appointed teacher, from that back woods little town of Nazareth?"

It turns out, though, that this guy, Jesus, at least has a sense of humor. Jesus quips right back to him, "glad to meet you, Nathanael . . . an Israelite, without deceit."

Now, it might be backhanded compliment. Maybe Jesus is saying he appreciates Nathanael speaking his mind—that he doesn't take offense at the whole Nazareth comment.

But we who are overhearing this conversation realize there's a double meaning here. Jesus' calling Nathanael an "Israelite" also brings echoes of the Jacob story into the conversation. Jacob of the Old Testament. Jacob, the deceiver, who would be known as Israel. But Nathanael is an Israelite without

deceit. Well played, Sir. Score in this conversational sparring about hometowns: one all. An unlikely beginning for a relationship.

It dawns on Nathanael that Jesus isn't there for the Nazareth comment. How does Jesus know what he has said? But even more--Nathanael presses further: How does Jesus know me? Jesus says he saw Nathanael sitting under that fig tree...when did that happen? How did that happen? All of this gives Nathanael pause for sure!

Philip is right after all. Nathanael is convinced. The traditional phrases come pouring out of Nathanael's mouth. You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.

This brief exchange allows us to acknowledge the fact that relationships and getting to know each other, really know each other, is important. Last week, Pastor Paisley introduced us to the question, "Where are you from?" and she focused on a personal perspective. This week I want to pose that same question, though answer it from the perspective of our church --specifically BLC.

If we ask the question from this perspective, let's explore what answers we might hear. But before I jump in, I need to mention, Melvin....

Melvin Peterson, a faithful and beloved disciple of Bethlehem, our church historian of sorts, not too long ago passed away. After the funeral, his son drops off a shoe box and in that box are pictures and documents that literally lays out the story of where Bethlehem is from...when I opened it, I felt goosebumps.

We just talked at a recent staff meeting how we wanted to pose this question and I think the Spirit was on the move! I had been thinking about digging around in our archives up in the storage closet...but instead this box shows up! Goosebumps for sure!

This coming February we will celebrate our 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation –so what a great time to remember where we come from! So here are a few ways, after perusing through this box of treasures, we might answer this question:

We come from a long line of disciples...as they left their motherland and arrived at one of the first settlements in Kane County they had a strong desire to worship God – this new found congregation was gathering to worship in a rented small clap-board building and when the congregation came to worship on easter Sunday in 1853 – the building literally had disappeared– it had been rolled away – but this didn't stop those who gathered that Easter morning from worshipping!

I can just imagine how this experience motivated this congregation in its early years to obtain land to build a church and establish a more permanent setting! Though, on a bit of a side note, I am glad we gave up on the lutefisk tradition – though I do know that some of you still have great recipes for glogg – a lovely thing to sip by a warm fire before turning in in the winter! So maybe let's hang on to that tradition 😊

We come from a faith tradition:

That believes that through God's grace, and God's grace alone, those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord are brought into a right relationship with God.

We come from a faith tradition that empowers us to freely express love to our neighbors—not to win the best seat in heaven through some point system, but in praise and thanksgiving to God who loves us unconditionally and forever. We are evangelical in the sense that we take seriously our proclaiming of the good news of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

We come from a faith tradition that is sacramental in that we live our lives together in the communion of the church, as we proclaim the Word of God, in and through the sacraments –this looks like weekly communion and an open table for all. I heard this past week a story from Suzanne H. When Steve and Suzanne moved to the area – and their boxes were not even unpacked yet, Suzanne was church shopping, her question as she called area churches, “Do you offer Christ’s meal each week?” Our answer was, “Yes!” They showed up the next Sunday. We continue to hear Pastor Sarah emphasize this invitation for us today! This tradition has been a gracious gift for many who have needed and desired Christ’s presence.

We come from a faith tradition that is confessional, confessing that Scripture—the Old and New Testaments—is the only source and norm of our doctrine, life, and service together, while we allow the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran Confessions to shed light on that Word.

We come for a faith tradition that is diaconal, in that service to the world and care for creation are integral to who we are as followers of Jesus. Anne Lee shared with me this past week, “Deacon Heather, we are a bit quiet about this part of our identity – but we have a long and rich history of doing just that! We come from a long line of believers who live out their faith by loving and serving our neighbors!”

And we come from a community of faith that...gathers for important pivotal moments in the life of our congregation – building new buildings, calling pastors to serve among us, deciding each year how we will approach our ministry together in a planned way through ministry priorities and budget.

I had to chuckle when I read about the special congregational meeting this church held to approve a freight bill of \$28.00 to be able to receive their new church bell (the one they had cracked right down the middle) – the year was 1897 – a considerable sum back then! So, certainly a special congregation meeting needed to be held!

In recognition of our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation, Pastor Martinson wrote a letter to the church. Pastor Martinson served this congregation from 1914-1924, he wrote, “Dear Congregation, but all our work here is for the future...our work means the salvation of those with whom we mingle in life...we need also a desire to lay hold of and to use the opportunities God gives us. May God bless our work with the upbuilding of his kingdom here on earth!”

And as Pastor Ekstrom shared at the dedication of this building we sit in right now, he said, “we give God thanks for the generous offer of land by Mr. & Mrs. Norris and family and since accepting this offer many committees meeting have been held – much planning, time and effort –but during all this time of construction and preparation the presence and guidance of God has been felt. May Bethlehem continue to share the gospel and the faith expressed by all who gather here!”

Either way –when this congregation had no building, as our congregation experienced in the late 1800’s, or with the dedication of this building in 1958, or our recent renovation of the same– this congregation has always had a good understanding that buildings are only a tool for living out the gospel and what God has called us to do as God’s disciples!

Some of you may remember that recently I posed in a sermon, what if these walls could talk? Boy, would they have a lot to say! This place is where we experience the milestones that run from baptisms to weddings to funerals. Here is the place we enter to find comfort, to cry, to rejoice, to sing, to pray, to be inspired by God's word and partake of Christ's meal at Christ's table.

The story of Philip and Nathanael in the Gospel of John gives us a clue about the kinds of places that help us come face to face with Jesus.

Philip does not mount a robust defense of what the town of Nazareth is or isn't. Instead, he simply says, "Come and see."

Come and see for yourself if Jesus is the fulfillment of everything that God has said and done. Come and see the place where Jesus is and make up your own mind after you encounter him.

This is the same Jesus who is a part of each of our faith stories –who breathed into us when we took our first breath; who made a promise to us the day we were baptized. This is the Jesus who has been part of the scenes of our stories from day one.

If we are to find God, to notice God working around and among us, we need to know what we are looking for. The direction of our gaze is important. We may be looking in all the wrong places, noticing all the wrong things, and we might miss the Kingdom of God breaking through if we do not keep our focus on the one asking the questions.

Dear siblings Christ – Come and see is an invitation to share our lives beyond our surface selves, to look deeper together at life's complexities. It is an invitation to mutual discovery and the sharing of our stories. The really cool thing is that

the Good News is shared in our personal encounters. Jesus invites the two to come and see--and that's what they do – and their lives are changed forever!

Another important take a way in today's reading that might help us is how Jesus turns around and Jesus beholds them. Jesus pays full attention to them. Jesus sees them. Jesus contemplates them.

First Jesus BEHOLDS, looks at Nathanael with his mind's eye and his heart's eye. Most of us are so busy, or distracted we sometimes are not really 'seeing' the person standing directly in front of us.

So, I wonder about your story. Who in your life has paid attention to you? Who has taken the time in their busy life and turned around and beheld you?

Who SAW YOU and asked you what are you looking for?

As your Deacon –who very much believes that Jesus lays out a model of discipleship that is faithful and makes God's heart burst with joy –let's think for one more minute what Jesus asks us--and let's practice answering.

Turn to someone next to you, or use one of the post-it notes in the pews and feel free to jot down your response to the following question: share a time when you have felt known and honored for you just being you?

CALL THEM BACK TOGETHER – INVITE THEM TO POST THEIR RESPONSES TO THE PAPER IN THE BACK –

Let us pray:

Here in this space, we are always invited to bring our full selves. We come into this space with our hurts, our joys, our struggles, and our dreams. God is here. God is at work among us.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

