

WGUMC January 18, 2015 "I Saw You Under the Fig Tree"
Micah 4:1-4 and John 1:43-51

Nathanael asked Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" [John 1:46] And I wondered if there's been anything good going on there lately, so I checked out the situation in Israel's largest Arab city. About a third of the population are Christian Arabs. The rest are Muslims. But so far they have managed to live together.

For one thing, they share a history. When the state of Israel was declared in 1948, the Zionists didn't run the Arabs out of Nazareth, as they did in other places in Palestine. Back then the city was majority Christian and therefore off limits because of the Western nations supporting Israel. So Nazareth was a relatively safe haven during the Palestine War. For that reason, many Muslims ended up moving there.

Since then, there have been conflicts, like when the Muslims tried to build a mosque right next to the Church of the Annunciation and when the Christians wanted to build a big

statue of Jesus, like the one in Rio, that would tower over the town. But recently both sides have accused the government of trying to create more religious tension as part of a strategy to divide and weaken the community.

This all puts Christians in Nazareth in an especially difficult situation. As a religious minority within a racial minority, they get it from all sides. They face discrimination by the state of Israel because they are Arab. But they have also felt threatened by other Arabs because they are Christian. Last year the long-time Christian mayor of Nazareth lost his bid for reelection. And today more and more Christians are contemplating leaving Jesus' hometown. Will anything but fear and frustration be coming out of Nazareth?

What Nazareth needs today is what the whole region desperately needs: a Mid-eastern Martin Luther King. Jews, Muslims and Christians desperately need someone to preach nonviolent resistance to oppression, to model alternatives to

revenge and retaliation, and to create spaces for truth and reconciliation. In other words, they need someone who reminds them of Jesus.

The Prince of Peace did come out of Nazareth long ago. If you remember, he was kicked out, for no prophet is accepted in his hometown. [Luke 4:24] And so he began to make his way from Nazareth down to what would be his new home base in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee.

Along the way he called some disciples. In the Gospel of John, he tells Philip, "Follow me." [1:43] And then Philip goes to Nathanael and tells him, "We have found him, the one Moses told us about. He is Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." But Philip is unconvinced. The Messiah is supposed to come from Bethlehem. What good could come from a two-bit town like Nazareth? Philip says, "Come and see." [1:45-6]

But when Nathanael sees Jesus, Jesus has a strange greeting for him: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no

deceit!" [1:47] What's that supposed to mean? Well, perhaps Jesus is saying that Nathanael is honest, unlike Israel—otherwise known as Jacob—the one who cheated his brother out of his birthright. Or perhaps the meaning is lost to us. Whatever Jesus means by this, Nathanael is impressed and asks him, "Where did you get to know me?" And Jesus answers even more mysteriously, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." [1:48] And to that, Philip responds, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

But how can he be so sure of this? He seems to think that Jesus is psychic. But why does being seen under the fig tree lead Nathanael to believe that Jesus is the Messiah?

Think about the fig tree. Fig trees held Messianic meanings for Jews in the ancient world. The prophet Micah had described the days to come when the Messiah will judge the nations. Then they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; they will not lift up their sword

against each other, neither will they learn war anymore. [Micah 4:3] And when the world is at peace, "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken." [4:4]

So when Jesus says that he sees Nathanael sitting under a fig tree it's as if he is saying, "Nathanael, I see you sitting in the kingdom of God." For Nathanael, that power—to see people not where they are but where they could be and to get them there—that is a power that only a Messiah could have. Jesus had the power to help his followers see their future and then transform their lives in order to get there. Philip, Nathanael, and all the rest were living under a brutal Roman occupation. The Romans had swords and spears and made everyone afraid. But Jesus had the power to help Nathanael see a different reality. He empowered Nathanael to see himself and his world at peace.

Martin Luther King testified to that same power. As a preacher of the Gospel, he helped oppressed people see themselves sitting under their own fig trees unafraid. With his help, they began to see a world different than the one they were living in. They could see it so clearly, in fact, that they were willing to dedicate their lives to making that dream a reality.

Followers of Jesus need that same power today. For starters, we need Jesus to help us disarm all of the IED's in our lives. By that, I mean that we need to beat the weapons we use to torture ourselves into tools we can use to nurture ourselves. Only God in Christ can help us beat that hurt into hope, that anger into action, and that poison into peace.

But that isn't enough, because we will never be truly at peace with ourselves unless we are helping others find their fig tree. Jesus said, "Follow me." So, followers of Jesus, what are you doing to help others see what you see? How are you

helping a friend, a family member, or a co-worker let go of the past and embrace the promise. How are you helping them see themselves not as a victim, but a victor, living not in a war zone or a fear zone, but in a faith zone?

And it doesn't stop there. There's a whole world of need out there. Some of us met some former residents of The Jungle last week. And what are we doing to enable them to see themselves sitting under their own fig tree, sleeping in their own bed, where no one will make them afraid?

And that just touches the need in our own neighborhood. What about Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Two thousand years ago, Jesus did. Today, the Jesus Trail does. The good news coming out of Nazareth today is the Jesus Trail. It was started by two young guys who had hiked all over the world and wanted to create a world-class trail in Israel that would not only promote ecotourism but "build transformational relationships and understandings between

different nationalities, cultures and religions in the Middle East."

[from jesustrail.com]

Maoz Inon is Israeli but got the idea of creating a Jesus Trail from Nazareth down to Capernaum, with guesthouses along the way. He teamed up with David Landis, a graduate of Eastern Mennonite University and experienced hiker, who mapped out the route and wrote the trail guide. The idea was to get people to travel light and leave no trace along the trail by eating at local restaurants, staying with local hosts, interacting with strangers, making friends and maybe finding their fig tree.

The 65 km trail goes through many points of historical and cultural interest for Christians, Jews, Muslims and Druze. It starts in Nazareth, goes through Cana (where Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding) and around the Horns of Hattin where the Muslim general Saladin defeated the Crusader army in 1187. It comes to Nebi Shu'eib, a shrine built over the tomb

of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law and a revered prophet for the Druze. Then it climbs down the Cliffs of Arbel where Herod's soldiers captured the Hasmonean rebels and threw them off the cliff. From there, it heads to Migdal (or Magdala, the home of Mary Magdalene) by the Sea of Galilee. Then you can go up to the Mount of Beatitudes where Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount before ending at the fishing village of Capernaum, which was Jesus' headquarters for his ministry in Galilee.

The Jesus Trail opened in 2009 and I want to walk it because it goes against the grain of so much of what's going on in that part of the world today. The founders say they "do not discriminate on the basis of religion, theology, race, creed, ancestry, gender, age, disability, or orientation." And they warn individuals and groups not to use the Jesus Trail "to promote an agenda that is divisive, discriminatory and/or counterproductive" to the purpose of the Trail. [jesustrail.com]

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? We have some reason to hope so. If only more of us would take the Jesus Trail. Even if we never make it to Nazareth, we can still take the walk. With Martin, we can still join the march. We can choose to follow the Way, discover our Truth, and learn to live the Life. Maybe if enough of us walk it, we will all look out from under our fig tree one day and see a world at peace. Follow me. Come and see.