

Sermon Notes: January 14, 2023 **Focus:** Nathanael's bias [Lectionary Readings](#)

I want to share some quotes today; explore some biblical geography; and look at Nathanael from today's gospel.

Nathanael's bias (everybody's bias) Sebastian Junger is one of my favorite authors. His latest book, *Freedom*, chronicles the walking journey that he and three of his compatriots undertook along the northeastern corridor of the US. They resolved to follow rail lines -- unless the police or locals made them divert from the path. He interspersed all this walking with the history of "freedom." He compared nomadic with settled society. He also examined the nature of conflict between big and small groups. He was keen to explore who is 'in' and who is 'out.'

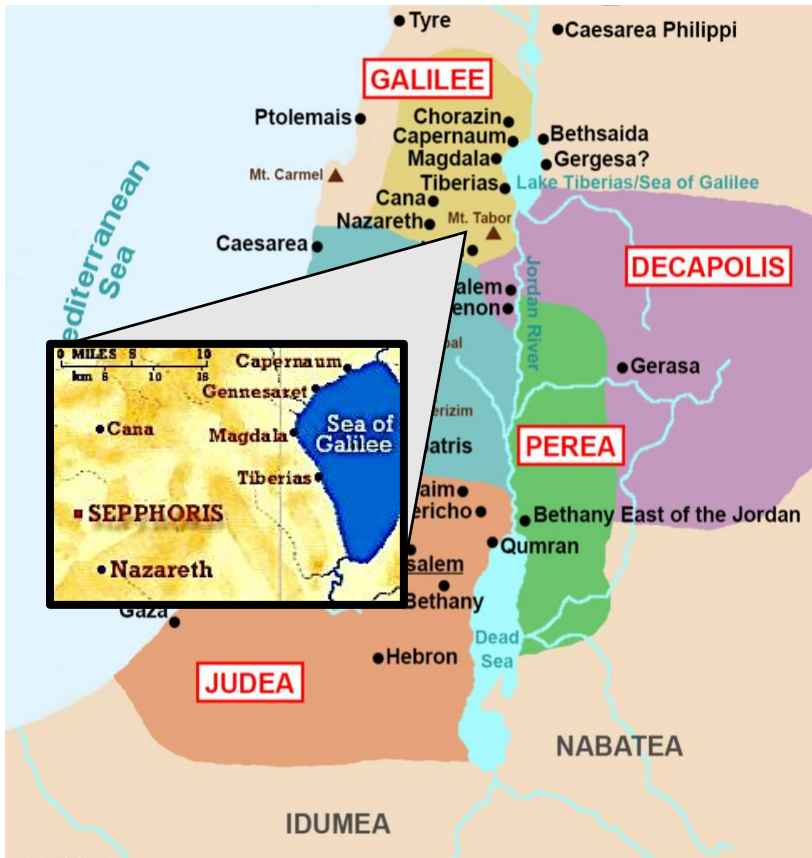
In today's gospel, Phillip was transformed by meeting Jesus. So, with the zeal of a new convert, he grabs his friend Nathanael to 'come and see.' Nathanael is not excited about outsiders, especially those who come from yuck... hillbilly Nazareth. I will talk about geography on page 2 to explore why he was so put off by Nazareth. But for now, I like what Junger writes about us believing in "our" specialness and how gross "they" are:

Many tribal societies refer to themselves as "The People," or "The Real People," generally classifying everyone else as barbarians, animals, or worse. The ancient Greek word for slave-andrapodon—was derived from the word for cattle and essentially meant "animal with human feet."

That is a very natural impulse. *Those people are sub-human; therefore you are more than justified in bullying, killing, even 'genociding' them at will. He did not make this abysmal observation as the final word. In contrast, Junger wrote about a train crash that is the beautiful, terrible counterpoint to "animals with human feet."*

In 1996, a southbound MARC commuter train with 150 passengers ran a signal outside of Silver Spring, Maryland and wound up on a collision course with a northbound Amtrak headed for Chicago. The MARC had her engine in the rear, which meant that a passenger car would absorb the impact. The engineer had roughly fifteen seconds. He threw the brakes shouting warnings to the passengers. The 130-ton Amtrak engine ripped the lead MARC car in half lengthwise and set the whole thing on fire with spilled diesel. All three crew members died trying to save people in the lead car, and all but eight passengers made it out alive. The engineer's reaction was not one that could be taught or drilled into him.

This I where I think we can find real inspiration. The engineer jumped in to sacrifice his life to save strangers. Tribalism is easy. Hatred is easy, but seeing all humans as one family saves us - literally and metaphorically. I think Nathanael would agree.



Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

Nathanael was a Galilean who thought he was something special. He was from Bethsaida, and places like Bethsaida, Capernaum, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem are mentioned often in the Bible. The city of Sepphoris: never occurs in the Bible. But I think it might be a clue to Nathanael’s out-group-bias. I propose that Nathanael fancied himself to be Sepphorian in spirit.

Sepphoris was likely the regional capital of Galilee and a jewel of opulent buildings and bustling

trade. This city also gets piously attributed as Mary’s hometown which *might* be where the annunciation took place (it’s about 3 miles from Nazareth).

Bethsaida was a lakeside town, and Nathanael thought he was at least better than those hillbillies from Nazareth because of his waterfront zip code. In today’s world, I have lost count on the number of people on social media who will say they are from San Francisco, but live in Martinez, Antioch, and Dublin. I don’t think those are bad places. But for them, San Francisco *feels* like where they should be from. SF feels like Sepphoris. Many of them will happily trash the rest of the country because they are something special. They probably have said something to the effect “Can anything good come out of Vallejo?”

What I love about this story is not only Nathanael seeing Jesus clearly, but also his in-group-bias disintegrating as a result. We would all do well to pray for the scales to fall from our eyes when we encounter our own in-group bias in the face of excellent people that we previously discounted.

I include this map-in-a-map because it gives perspective on the region of the Galilee and locates Sepphoris, which is not on a lot of Bible maps. So - may you know the joy of loving real people, just like Phillip and Nathanael did. May you know the joy of reflexively helping strangers. Lastly, I include a story on page 3 and 4, unedited (except for blocking curse words). It is a great story that I hope you read just because it is great.

Todd

Today you, tomorrow me

Back in 2010 a reddit user posted a story about hitchhikers and his car breaking down. I consider it a perfect story:

“Just about every time I see someone I stop. I kind of got out of the habit in the last couple of years, moved to a big city and all that, my girlfriend wasn’t too stoked on the practice. Then some s--t happened to me that changed me and I am back to offering rides habitually. If you would indulge me, it is long story and has almost nothing to do with hitch hiking other than happening on a road.

This past year I have had 3 instances of car trouble. A blow out on a freeway, a bunch of blown fuses and an out of gas situation. All of them were while driving other people’s cars which, for some reason, makes it worse on an emotional level. It makes it worse on a practical level as well, what with the fact that I carry things like a jack and extra fuses in my car, and know enough not to park, facing downhill, on a steep incline with less than a gallon of fuel.

Anyway, each of these times this s--t happened I was DISGUSTED with how people would not bother to help me. I spent hours on the side of the freeway waiting, watching roadside assistance vehicles blow past me, for AAA to show. The 4 gas stations I asked for a gas can at told me that they couldn’t loan them out ‘for my safety’ but I could buy a really s---y 1-gallon one with no cap for \$15. It was enough, each time, to make you say s--t like ‘this country is going to hell in a handbasket.’

But you know who came to my rescue all three times? Immigrants. Mexican immigrants. None of them spoke a lick of the language. But one of those dudes had a profound effect on me.

He was the guy that stopped to help me with a blow out with his whole family of 6 in tow. I was on the side of the road for close to 4 hours. Big jeep, blown rear tire, had a spare but no jack. I had signs in the windows of the car, big signs that said NEED A JACK and offered money. No dice. Right as I am about to give up and just hitch out there a van pulls over and dude bounds out. He sizes the situation up and calls for his youngest daughter who speaks English. He conveys through her that he has a jack but it is too small for the Jeep so we will need to brace it. He produces a saw from the van and cuts a log out of a downed tree on the side of the road. We rolled it over, put his jack on top, and bam, in business. I start taking the wheel off and, if you can believe it, I broke his tire iron. It was one of those collapsible ones and I wasn’t careful, and I snapped the head I needed clean off. F--k.

No worries, he runs to the van, gives it to his wife and she is gone in a flash, down the road to buy a tire iron. She is back in 15 minutes, we finish the job with a little sweat

and cussing (stupid log was starting to give), and I am a very happy man. We are both filthy and sweaty. The wife produces a large water jug for us to wash our hands in. I tried to put a 20 in the man's hand but he wouldn't take it so I instead gave it to his wife as quietly as I could. I thanked them up one side and down the other. I asked the little girl where they lived, thinking maybe I could send them a gift for being so awesome. She says they live in Mexico. They are here so mommy and daddy can pick peaches for the next few weeks. After that they are going to pick cherries then go back home. She asks if I have had lunch and when I told her 'no' she gave me a tamale from their cooler, the best f---g tamale I have ever had.

So, to clarify, a family that is undoubtedly poorer than you, me, and just about everyone else on that stretch of road, working on a seasonal basis where time is money, took an hour or two out of their day to help some strange dude on the side of the road when people in tow trucks were just passing me by. Wow...

But we aren't done yet. I thank them again and walk back to my car and open the foil on the tamale cause I am starving at this point and what do I find inside? My f----g \$20 bill! I whirl around and run up to the van and the guy rolls his window down. He sees the \$20 in my hand and just shaking his head no like he won't take it. All I can think to say is 'Por Favor, Por Favor, Por Favor' with my hands out. Dude just smiles, shakes his head and, with what looked like great concentration, tried his hardest to speak to me in English:

'Today you.... tomorrow me.'

Rolled up his window, drove away, his daughter waving to me in the rear view. I sat in my car eating the best f---g tamale of all time and I just cried. Like a little girl. It has been a rough year and nothing has broke my way. This was so out of left field I just couldn't deal.

In the 5 months since I have changed a couple of tires, given a few rides to gas stations and, once, went 50 miles out of my way to get a girl to an airport. I won't accept money. Every time I tell them the same thing when we are through:

'Today you.... tomorrow me.'

Too long/did not read (TLDR): long rambling story about how the kindness of strangers, particularly folks from south of the border, forced me to be more helpful on the road and in life in general. I am sure it won't be as meaningful to anyone else, but it was seriously the highlight of my 2010." – u/rhoner

Have a good week

Todd