“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask: Where are You From?

Genesis 2: 4b – 15, John 1: 35 – 51

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church August 8, 2021

Where are you from? Me? I’m from Memphis, the Bluff City. I’m from Nashville, the Athens of the South. I’m from Tuscaloosa, T-town. I’m from the South. Probably always will be. I grew up wearing smocked dresses and Mary Janes to church. I ran barefoot in the summer and prayed desperately for one good sledding snow in the winter.

When you are born and raised in the South there are expectations. Just having been a product of southern soil, you should be able to bake a mean biscuit, write a prompt and eloquent thank you note, have sweet tea in the fridge year-round, and have home grown tomatoes to give to the neighbors. (They don’t have to be heirloom; a good old Big Boy will be just fine.) I’m afraid I rely on frozen biscuits, my thank you notes are almost always late (And if I still owe you one, I’m sorry), there’s only Diet Coke in my fridge, and I look to my friends to share their sun ripened home grown tomatoes.

Where am I from? Geographically, I won’t live up to all the expectations. I will probably fit some of the stereotypes. I will be a mixed bag of disappointments and surprises. But where are you from can also mean “who are your people” or what kind of family? Large? Small? Tight knit? Distant?

Where are you from can mean “what part of town are you from?” Neighborhoods have their own personalities…trailer parks…gated communities…subsidized housing…new construction and old. What school did you go to? How often do we make assumptions about someone based on their origins?

The places we call home shape us for better or worse. Make us more aware of some things and less aware of others – socially, economically, environmentally, politically, spiritually. Where are you from? How did that place shape you? (Maybe you will want to stop by virtual coffee fellowship today if you are worshiping online and share a story about your home!)

In Genesis we heard the second creation story, the one in which, instead of creating two humans, God simply creates “adam,” “human” (which does not mean “man,” but is, rather, a “gender-full[[1]](#endnote-1) word, encompassing the entire gender spectrum) from the “adamah,” the nutrient rich topsoil. Then God cradles the human in their arms and breathes life into its lungs. Where are we from? We, all of us, each of us, are from God! God is our origin. *God* is our home. We carry God’s very breath within us.

Even as we celebrate our diversity, we recognize the commonality we share: the story of the home we share. Surely this should be reason enough to treat one another with compassion and respect.

*Where are you from?*

As Jesus walked along the paths of Galilee, he carried the story of his home with him. The story of Nazareth, a small village of 200 – 400 people. “The Hebrew Scriptures never mention Nazareth, much less associate it with messianic expectations. Nazareth, then, lent no special status to its inhabitants…[[2]](#endnote-2) Theologian Lee Barrett reminds us that Jesus enters this scene as an ordinary human from an ordinary town. “Jesus has performed no miracle, shown no sign, and engaged in no teaching. Jesus has presented no proclamation about the reign of God that could excite the imagination of Philip or anyone else.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Just an ordinary man from an ordinary town. The baby who was cradled in a manger, who spent his early life as a refugee, now enters into his ministry with the same, disturbing humility.

The first clue to Jesus’ identity is given by John the baptizer. He sees Jesus and shouts out, “Look, the lamb of God!” And that is enough of a witness for his disciples to go and follow Jesus. These disciples call Jesus “rabbi,” “teacher, but one of them, Andrew, quickly transitions to calling him the Messiah. The descriptions of Jesus continue to pile up, with Philip calling Jesus “The one Moses wrote about in the law and prophets.” Lamb of God. Rabbi. Messiah. The One of whom Moses foretold. These are weighty names, bearing promises of life renewed, justice restored, peace established.

But then Philip adds the hometown reference: “he is Joseph’s son, from Nazareth,” and Nathanael bursts out: Nazareth? *Nazareth?* Can anything good come from there?

You can almost hear him laughing. It’s the foolish surprise we have when we learn that someone – whether a political leader, artist or scholar – tells you they are from a one stop light town – rather than NY, Chicago, Atlanta, LA.

Jesus appreciates Nathanael’s honesty. He appreciates that Nathanael calls it like he sees it. Why would anyone expect a Messiah to emerge from Nazareth? But assumptions often cause us to miss the truth before us. Assumptions can be difficult to clear away. They cling so tightly, clouding our ability to approach something with an open mind.

But Jesus loves a good challenge, and Nathanael has given him just that. Though Nathanael is not yet ready to identify Jesus as anything but Joseph’s son, Jesus is ready to proclaim Nathanael’s identity. He gets Nathanael. He understands how he thinks, and just as John had called out, “Look, the Lamb of God,” so Jesus calls out, “[Look!] There’s a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body.” (John 1:47, The Message)

Here's where it gets fun. Jesus goes on to explain to Nathanael that he “will see heaven open and God’s angels going up to heaven and down to earth on the Son of Man.” Nathanael, who knows the Scriptures don’t have any mention of Nazareth, must also recognize this image of angels ascending and descending from heaven. The reference is to a story of Jacob. Do you remember Jacob? He was quite the deceiver He had a lot of false bones in his body! Jacob stole his older brother Esau’s birthright by tricking his dying father. He caused a huge rift between himself and his brother, which was eventually mended, but many tears were shed until that day.

In addition to being a trickster, Jacob was also a dreamer. After receiving his father’s blessing, he sets out to find a wife. Genesis 28: 11 - 15

When the sun had set, he took one of the stones at that place and put it near his head. Then he lay down there. **12**He dreamed and saw a raised staircase, its foundation on earth and its top touching the sky, and God’s messengers were ascending and descending on it. **13**Suddenly the Lord was standing on it[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+28&version=CEB#fen-CEB-787b)] and saying, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. **14**Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth; you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants. **15**I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you.”

Quite a dream. And Nathanael would recognize the reference, and he would be able to interpret Jesus what has just said in the context of this story. In Jacob’s dream, God was standing on the staircase, but now the Son of Man is standing on the earth, and God’s messengers are coming up and down beside him. In both stories, the communication flows from earth to heaven and heaven to earth, but now, Jesus is present among us. God has drawn near. Jesus is reminding Nathanael of God’s promise: your descendants will become like the dust of the earth – which is a nice throw back to our Genesis story of humans created from the dust, the rich soil. And humanity will find a home throughout the earth. God’s promise of presence, of protection, of a home is for all generations.

Jacob, before reuniting with Esau, wrestles with an angel through the night, and in the morning, he demands the angel give him a blessing before he will let go. The angel renames Jacob “Israel” “one who struggles with God.” One more opportunity for Nathanael to enter the story, to imagine being that one who can wrestle with God, struggle with God. Jesus has called him an Israelite with no deceit. Barrett invites us to imagine:

Nathanael seeing the very face of God, just as Jacob did. Jesus the son of Man is the ultimate ladder stretching between heaven and earth. Jesus is the point of contact between the finite and the infinite, the conjunction of time and eternity. Jesus is the place where the heavens are opened and the divine glory can be contemplated. Similarly, Nathanael as the guileless Jacob, the true Israelite, is the prototype of a new humanity born in Christ.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In response to Christ’s recognition of Nathanael, this newly called disciple rolls multiple titles together and says, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1: 49) He is so keenly aware that one name for Jesus will never be enough. Each name offers a different way of knowing and loving God.

Here’s your fun fact about Nathanael – he’s only mentioned in John. People who like neat lists of the disciples’ names, combine Nathanael with Bartholomew because Bartholomew isn’t actually a name. Bartholomew translates as “son of Tholomeus.” It is a possibility that Nathanael and Bartholomew are the same person. But I would suggest that it is also okay to live with the mystery of Nathanael, this disciple who appears only in John’s retelling. Try on Nathanael’s cloak and sandals for yourself and walk with Jesus. Imagine living as that person “in whom there is no deceit.” Imagine being that person, who seeks Jesus as teacher, who trusts in Jesus as the son of God, who celebrates the continuation of the ancient story, recognizing Jesus as a new king of Israel. Imagine holding that image of Jesus, who brings God’s realm to earth, inviting to claim the promise that God is our home.

Where are you from? From God, in whom I live and move and have my being. Amen.

1. I was first introduced to the term “gender-full” by Avery Smith. You can read more about this concept here: [God is not genderless, but gender-full - Contents and Containers (jonnyrashid.com)](https://www.jonnyrashid.com/god-not-genderless-gender-full/) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors; Leslie J. Hoppe, p. 261. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, Lee Barrett, p. 260. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, Lee Barrett, p. 264 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)