

The Convention of the Diocese of New York, November 11, 2022

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John 1:44-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

So here's the story—After being in exile for about 50 years, away from their homeland, the Jewish people are finally allowed to return to Judah and to Jerusalem, the center of their glory days as a people and as a kingdom.

But when they return, they find nothing as it had been. Like the victims of fires and hurricanes or other disasters, in our own time, homes and buildings no longer exist. What was, is no more. But most devastating of all for those returning to Jerusalem, the temple, the grand meeting place between the Jewish people and God, has been utterly destroyed.

And just like today, after fires or hurricanes or other disasters, a group of returnees musters the strength to begin rebuilding. It won't be as it was, of course, but at least it will be something.

They start with reconstructing the altar so that they can resume their sacrifices to God, which they do with redoubled devotion.

And then they move on to the next important piece of rebuilding. They lay out the foundation of the temple, itself. And when it is all laid out, they begin a great celebration of the new life it means for them.

But then something extraordinary happens.

Those who have *only* known exile, who have *never* seen the earlier temple, shout for joy that this day has arrived, that this rebuilding of the temple has begun at last. But others, older people, who remember the glory, the size, and the opulence, of the first temple, of Solomon's temple, and the kingdom it represented, those who remember *that* temple and *that* moment in their history, wail in grief.

And, as the Scripture says, the sound of the wailing was so loud that someone listening in could not distinguish the shouts of joy from the cries of grief.

About this passage and the emotions connected to it, one Professor of Hebrew Scriptures said something like this: it isn't just nostalgia for the size of the temple that's causing some of the people to cry out in grief. It's the fact that the destruction of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the captivity in Babylon, all raised crucial theological questions for the Jewish people. And the question were these: "Are God's promises of land, of presence, of steadfast love still true? And flowing from this, is there really a future for us in which the steadfast love of God will accompany us and show us a way forward?"

I don't know about you, but I've been carrying around some version of these questions in my head since the beginning of Covid and throughout the political, racial and ethnic and, yes, ecological times we've been living through: "Are your promises, O God, of your presence with us, of your steadfast love, of a Church guided by you, of a way forward guided by you, are these things real? Or have you abandoned us for all kinds of reasons too numerous or too painful to go into? Do you care about us? And, if so, where should we go, what should we do, to become more aware of that care, to access that care more fully? For much faces us personally, in our communities, in our country and in our churches."

I feel like as a Bishop I shouldn't be saying these things, and yet, it seems to me, honesty about them is the first step towards any remedy, towards anything genuine that will sustain this wonderful and sacred and wounded mystery that is the Church—especially in these times, in this nation, and on this planet.

And, of course, as I say these things, I'm acutely aware of the fact that for some people, people of color, people in poverty, LGBTQ+ people, people new to the US, it did not take Covid to raise these questions—for these questions have been part of some people's experience their whole lives. "Oh, God, don't you care about us? Where can we go for access to that sense of caring?"

It's early in Jesus' ministry in our story from John's Gospel. After calling his first disciples (Andrew and Simon Peter), Jesus goes to Galilee where he calls Philip who then talks to Nathaniel about who Jesus might be. Nathaniel, a blunt, skeptical Israelite who has heard that Jesus is from Nazareth, muses out loud within earshot of Jesus about whether anything good can come from the hick town of Nazareth where Jesus was raised.

Jesus seems to like Nathaniel's bluntness. And so after a little more exchange between the two, in which Nathaniel feels really "seen" by Jesus, Nathaniel blurts out that Jesus is the Son of God. It's then that Jesus decides to tell Nathaniel (and I would add, tell all of us) who he really is.

"Are you now saying, Nathaniel, because you feel "seen" by me, that I'm the Son of God?" Jesus asks him. "You will see greater things than that. Though I was raised in a little hick town, the person you see before you will be the place where the angels of God will descend and ascend upon the earth, where heaven will be connected to earth and earth to heaven."

"And though you can't understand it now, Nathaniel, the way this will happen, the way that heaven and earth will be connected through me will be through the cross I will be nailed to, through the cross I will die upon, through the cross from which, by the power of God, I will be raised to new life."

What does this mean for us?

I think it means that we have a response to the questions I raised just a moment ago. We have a response. It is the response you and I are given over and over again in this wonderful, sacred and wounded Church we are all a part of. That response, that answer is the crucified and risen Christ and the way in which the pattern and power of his death and resurrection continue to be mediated to and made available to us.

Let me say more about this.

You and I, like our Jewish forebears in the story from Ezra, are looking these days at what we *thought* was the foundation of our churches and ministries—looking at things that can be counted and measured—things like attendance, numbers & success of programs, and money. And as we look at these *seemingly* foundational things today, we remember a time either long ago or before Covid when it was different. And so we grieve and ask the very questions about God that I posed to you earlier.

But these are *not* our foundation, are they? Rather our foundation is the stone that the builders rejected, the son of God raised in a little hick town.

Just as was the case with Nathaniel, our foundation, Jesus, “sees” us—understands the hopes and dreams and griefs of our hearts. Hears and receives the questions that we perhaps are timid or afraid or even embarrassed to voice.

But he does *more* than just see us. He connects heaven to earth and earth to heaven through his death on the cross and his resurrection. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he shows us and works with us to make new things out of the shards of our shattered expectations. This is the Paschal mystery that we celebrate at the Easter Vigil.

But here’s the thing—the Paschal mystery is not just about him, it’s *about us*; it’s about what’s happening *to us*. God is inviting us to make new things not just incrementally, but out of the ashes, out of the rubble, out of what feels like our failure. That’s the way God in Christ makes new things.

And, of course, all of us in this room are critical to this perplexing, wondrous and sacred work. The crucified and risen Christ is inviting the people in this room—the bishops, the priests, the deacons and the lay people—into a life that lives out the process of the Paschal mystery: that is, to look deeply into the very circumstances we would rather *not* be in right now for seeds of the new thing that wants to come into being.

And when I say all of us, I mean all of us, whether you’re from a big congregation, a small congregation, or a middle-sized congregation. Whether you’re located in a village, in a rural area, in the city or in a suburb. Whether you’re from a thriving congregation, a struggling congregation or a not-quite-sure-what-kind-of-congregation-you-are congregation. For it’s in all these different places and circumstances that the Paschal mystery as a way of living is calling us to new forms of life.

One of the stories about the Paschal mystery process that I continue to come back to in my life is a story I heard from an Episcopal preacher in a parish located in the neighborhood of the University of Chicago where I completed an MBA and finished up an unfinished M. Div. some years ago. I had come to Chicago after a divorce that in part came about as a result of my husband and I losing our

first-born child at 5 ½ years of age to what was then an incurable disease. I was putting one foot in front of another in this new city but was mystified about how what I was doing could add up to anything. And, truth be told, I was carrying around some of the same questions about God that I shared with you earlier.

Then one Sunday morning at little old St. Paul and the Redeemer Church, the preacher told this story.

Once upon a time there was a first grader whose class did one of those plaster art projects that kids take home to their parents. One particular child was really into it, finishing his plaster handprint with great delight.

Well, the day finally arrived when the children were to take their creations home to their parents. The kids were all excited, but one in particular, our hero, was over-the-top about it all.

As the children, all with their creations in hand, came to the area where they were to meet their parents, the sound of their excitement filled the air. Our hero, of course, took part in this, talking loudly and excitedly as he waited for his mother to arrive.

And arrive she did; and that's, of course, when the unthinkable happened. In his excitement and haste to get to his mother, his creation, his handprint, slipped from his grasp and shattered into pieces on the linoleum floor.

He was crushed and began to wail inconsolably.

Meanwhile, his mother, who "saw" her child, who understood her child, had seen it all. She paused, bent down with a sad expression on her face, and put her arms around him. She listened to his cries and to his words of anger and grief, which were many.

And then after a while she said this to him: "Honey...honey. Let's pick up the pieces. Let's pick up *all* the pieces. Let's pick up *all* the pieces and see what new thing we can make out of them."