**Nazareth the Township**

**Preached at First Worship, Old South Church Boston**

**On January 18th, 2015**

**John 1:43-51**

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 toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get 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."

Before I begin, two definitions:

**Township** – a suburb or city in South Africa [officially](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/officially) [designated](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/designate) for [black](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/black) [occupation](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/occupation) by [apartheid](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/apartheid) [legislation](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/legislation).

**Apartheid** - "the state of being apart" (literally "apart-hood"): a system of racial segregation in South Africa enforced through legislation by the National Party between 1948 and 1994.

In South Africa, during apartheid, the government implemented a policy of "resettlement". Millions of people were forced to relocate to designated "group areas". In [Johannesburg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannesburg) during the 1950’s 60,000 people were moved to the new township of [Soweto](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soweto) – an abbreviation for the “South West Townships.”

A township is a place where the original residents are annexed, to make way for the dominant group. Cities, like Johannesburg, were reserved for the white population only, but black workers and help were still needed. These workers made the daily trip between township and mines, or between township and white homes and businesses in the city. It is no wonder that townships were places where tensions brewed and where anger and opposition threatened to spill over into violence at any moment.

So, the place name “Soweto” came with a certain gravity, for me as a teenager and young adult in the United Kingdom in the 1970’s and 80’s. The BBC news brought images of violent protests, slums and sub-human living conditions. We saw police suppressing riots with guns and clubs. I would not have chosen to visit any township, particularly Soweto – a fearful God-forsaken place. If you had asked me, in 1977, if anything good could come out of Soweto, I would have been extremely skeptical.

And so we turn to our scripture reading for today…

Jesus of Nazareth is going about his business, identifying his very first disciples, in the area of Galilee. In Bethsaida, a fishing town on the northern shore of the lake, he finds Philip and says “follow me”. Philip is quite sure that Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth, is the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote. He goes eagerly to tell the good news to his friend, Nathanael. But, hearing the name of Nazareth, Nathanael is not so sure “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” He asks.

We might wonder why Nathanael would be so prejudiced against the people of Nazareth.

Around the time of Jesus’ birth, the Romans had moved into the city Sepphoris. They had violently subdued the locals and turned the city into a lavish showplace for the Empire. Sepphoris had become gentrified. The local people had been annexed to the poor villages of the region, including Nazareth about 4 miles away. Many would travel back to the city, perhaps, to support the extravagant lifestyles of the oppressor. Perhaps even Joseph, and then Jesus, provided carpentry services for the Romans building up their fancy dwellings. Nazareth was a poor, God-forsaken place. Some might even call it a township. Perhaps this is why Nathanael is skeptical about the Messiah coming from this place. Maybe the independent fisher folk of the shore of Galilee look down on these in-landers, whose only option is to enter into servitude for the oppressor.

Nathanael certainly doesn’t hide his feelings about this place, these Nazarenes. He provokes … “Are you sure we can trust this guy, Philip? I’m not so sure.” To which Philip simply challenges “come and see.”

A personal meeting with Jesus wins Nathanael over, though. Jesus goes to town with Nathanael, seemingly knowing him inside and out. He begins with flattery – proclaiming that Nathanael is “an Israelite without any deceit”. Then he goes on to prophesy that Nathanael will witness great things – the very meeting of heaven and earth. Jesus explains that his foreknowledge of Nathanael sitting under a fig tree is the simplest, least significant sign. As a disciple, Nathanael will see far, far greater things. In essence “he ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

In 2011, I made a trip to South Africa with my family. We were celebrating a significant wedding anniversary, and fulfilling a long-held ambition to visit the continent of Africa. We hoped to take in the beautiful country and wildlife. We also wanted to learn more about the culture and the history. We were prompted by my younger cousin, who had worked for 15 years as an engineer in gold and platinum mines. She was planning to move back home to England. This could be our last change to visit her in SA.

In South Africa everyone wanted to tell their story: their experiences of apartheid and its dismantling. One cab driver who had grown up Soweto said that his mother had worked for a family in Johannesburg as a maid. It had been her job to carry out the trash, so each day she extracted the previous day’s newspaper and brought it home. That is how the family learned what was going on in the world.

Almost everyone we encountered loved Nelson Mandela, the civil rights leader during apartheid and the nation’s first black president. But they knew that Mandela’s work for freedom was not yet over. Despite their minority position, whites were still the wealthiest population, and owned most of the businesses. And education was still not available without a fee.

When we visited Soweto we decided to take a guided tour. We needed it, first because the suburb still has its dangerous parts, but also it is huge! Soweto occupies 77 square miles, and is officially home to 1.25 million people – probably an extreme underestimation. There are still slums in Soweto, but there are also many areas of good housing, and some quite lavish neighborhoods with a large soccer stadium and shopping mall.

In 1976 there had been a student protest in the township, known as the Soweto Uprising. This was in response to a government plan for the schools to teach only in Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor.

On our tour we visited Soweto’s largest Catholic church, Regina Mundi. We were shown bullet holes made from the inside of the church during the protest. Students had tried to take refuge in the church, and the police had come in and shot at them. Later we visited the Hector Pieterson museum, named for a 12 year-old boy, one of the first to be killed during the uprising. An iconic photograph, taken by Sam Nzima, shows an older boy running from the scene carrying Hector: “I saw a child fall down. Under a shower of bullets I rushed forward and went for the picture. It had been a peaceful march, the children were told to disperse, they started singing N’gosi Sike leli Afrika (‘God bless Africa’). The police were ordered to shoot” said Nzima. This was the beginning of a country-wide student boycott.

Can anything good come out of Soweto?

When the young Nelson Mandela moved from the countryside to Johannesburg he lived in Soweto. He lived there until he was imprisoned for 27 years for “conspiring to overthrow” the state.

And he returned to Soweto when he was released in 1990. Even while in prison on the windswept Robben Island, off Capetown, more than 1,000 kms from Soweto, Mandela had a profound influence over the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa.

Can anything good come out of a South African jail?

But today we are remembering the life of civil rights leader, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.. Later today, in Festival worship, we will hear Dr. King’s “letter from a Birmingham jail”: a reply to a public letter from white clergy leaders, criticizing the demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement as too extreme - too much too soon. But, as Fannie Lou Hamer said later, black Americans were “sick and tired of being sick and tired”.

King replied to the letter saying “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.” He described Birmingham as “the most segregated city in the United States.” The life of a black American growing up in that place could indeed feel God-forsaken. Children were limited to playing in the streets, because they had no access to the parks. They were limited to black only churches because the white churches would not admit them. They were limited to eating and drinking only in the black-designated areas of town – only in the “townships.”

King saw that “the ultimate tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people.”

It must make us think … can anything good come out of Birmingham, Alabama?

Rev. Dr. King and Nelson Mandela are civil rights heroes. They rose up in the most God-forsaken situations, and brought justice through their commitment to Jesus’ ethic of love. But in every place whether it is South Africa or the United States, the work is not yet done.

We are well aware that here in the United States, black citizens still suffer.

- There is a wealth gap between white and black households that is greater than that in South Africa during apartheid.

- African Americans are incarcerated at six times the rate of whites. And this begins with a rate of suspensions and expulsions for black students of 3 times that of whites.

- Black Americans are 4 times more likely to be stopped and frisked by police than whites.

- And, of course, tragic cases in recent months have brought to sharp focus the numbers of black adults and children who have been killed in the name of law enforcement.

Indeed … Can anything good come out of Ferguson?

Jesus was looking for disciples, that day in Galilee, ones who would be willing to be his movement of love and justice. He chose Nathanael, the skeptical one, to impart a vision. Not only would Nathanael be “seen” sitting under a fig tree. Nathanael would witness far greater works, as a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth.

- Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

- Can anything good come out of the township of Soweto?

- Can anything good come out of the jail in Birmingham Alabama?

- Can anything good come out of Ferguson?

If we look to these places, we will eventually see the place where heaven and earth meet. Whether we are people struggling for our own freedom, or we are allies called to stand side by side …. we are all disciples.

May we resolve to look for Christ coming out of unexpected places. And when we see, may we follow, so that even greater things than these will come to pass.

Amen, Amen!