**I’ve been meaning to ask – Where are you from?**

I am from the very deep south – the Southern Hemisphere… the southern tip of a large continent – a small country called South Africa, known for apartheid and Nelson Mandela. I am from guilt and shame about its history. I am from beauty and sunshine. I am from a city which blooms purple in springtime. I am from love and compassion and care, from mountain vacations and barbeque Christmases. I am from faith and nightly Bible stories. I am from guilt, pain and bitterness and sometimes dysfunctional relationships. I am from cream soda floats on summer afternoons in grandma’s backyard and Christmas lights outside on pine trees. I am from hard work and responsibility. I am from believing that you can do and be anything that you put your mind to and work towards. I am from hours of training in a gym on uneven bars and beams, tumbling and vaulting, and I am from music.

Where and who I am from has shaped, without a doubt, the person I am today. My beliefs about helping those on the margins and the least of these. My faith and biblical knowledge; my striving to be perfect and the best at what I do; the deep down knowing that hard work pays off. My passion for social justice and wanting to work for diversity, equity and inclusion of all.

I’ve been meaning to ask… where are you from? Who are you from? What are you from? What is your story and shaped you into you? I bet Adam had a hard time answering that question… See, it is in hearing each other’s stories that we find deeper connection; it is in listening and understanding that we build relationships and unlearn our biases and assumptions about others. It is in all of this that we start to see God’s divine image in others and build communities of welcome around the table. So, this is where we start.

In today’s gospel lesson, as we read about the calling of the first disciples, we find ourselves in good company. John’s disciple, Andrew, calls his brother Peter to follow. Jesus calls on Philip, who in turn, goes to Nathanael and tells him that they found the Messiah - the promised one whom Moses and the prophets pointed to. You would think that most would be super excited about it – the Jewish oppression is over!!! Finally, the Anointed is here and will take over as King!

Nathanael – not so much! “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” He was no dummy – he sat under the fig tree every day, as per Jewish custom, and studied the Torah. There was nothing in there that said anything about Nazareth. Nazareth, the little Podunk, one-donkey town, on the wrong side of the tracks in the backwaters of Galilee. He knew the Messiah was to come and soon expected, but out of Nazareth – no way! Nothing good comes out of Nazareth, according to Nathanael’s assumptions and opinions, at least.

We all carry our own assumptions and biases, don’t we? “He’s from Jersey…enough said.” “They are up to no good – you better keep an eye on them”. “She’s the town gossip; makes me wonder what she says about me.” “I know their kind – all alcoholics and addicts”. “They’re just lazy – they will take the system for all they can.” “Nothing good can come of that situation.”

Yes, Nathanael, and people like me and you - people of faith - make assumptions like this every day. We all have our Nazareths… Assumptions about other people; how they will behave, what they will say or do, what they think or believe. We make assumptions about situations – the state of the Middle East or race relations or politics or the church and we declare it hopeless. “Nothing good can come out of it”, we say. But mostly, our assumptions are about us; our fears, our prejudices, our guilt, our losses, our wounds. The secrets we keep, our addictions, the hurt we caused, our own pain and grief, which we project onto another person or situation. We see these in all our isms… racism, classism, ageism, sexism…

These assumptions influence everything we do and say – our lives. They destroy relationships, love and life. They keep life superficial and narrow our vision; we think we know more than we really do. Assumptions are our hiding places, closing off possibilities of growth and change; they allow us to not take the risk of deeper knowing and to be known; they deny reconciliation, forgiveness and healing – a new way of being. They drag down our faith and leave little room for God to show up and act. They make us believe that the person on the street corner, asking for money, will go buy alcohol or drugs; that the person looking for a ride is meaning us harm; that the homeless person is lazy; that the person with darker skin is less than…

I believe that at their deepest level, our assumptions – our Nazareths – are about our understanding of God. How anything good can come out of Nazareth is so unGod-like. God could not possible be present or active or revealed in Nazareth, whether it be another person, a relationship or situation, or our own life. Where God comes from should be more deserving, special, holy, likeable, better behaved, better dressed, not high as a kite. It is just so much easier to assume... assume that more conditions need to be met before God can show up. Our Nazareths are the places where we cannot see possibilities or good… But for God, it is exactly the place of incarnation and self-revelation.

See, God is never limited by our assumptions – by our Nazareths. God chose Nazareth as the place where Jesus was from; the place of Love’s revelation. The place where our servant King grew up as a carpenter’s son – not a white-collar worker with prestige and financial success. A place where Jesus relied on support from others in his ministry – not self-sufficiency. A place where our only hope in life and death had darker skin than most of us. A place with Middle Eastern culture, who raised the Jesus to whom our ultimate allegiance should be.

This is the place with an invitation to “come and see”; to discover a deeper truth, to experience a new relationship and to live a new life. When Nathanael accepts the invitation, putting aside his own prejudices, he finds himself recognized – known by Love who has seen him all along.

Over and over Jesus shows up from the Nazareths in our own lives, calling us to come and see. And whenever we come out from under our fig trees, we open ourselves up to see God at work and present in all those unexpected places and people. And as we let go of our assumptions, new possibilities, relationships and life arise. The apostle Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians: “26Look at your situation when you were called, brothers and sisters! By ordinary human standards not many were wise, not many were powerful, not many were from the upper class. 27But God chose what the world considers foolish to shame the wise. God chose what the world considers weak to shame the strong. 28And God chose what the world considers low-class and low-life-- what is considered to be nothing-- to reduce what is considered to be something to nothing.”

And let us not fool ourselves… Jesus’ first disciples were not much to behold either. Peter always had his foot in his mouth, Thomas doubted, Judas betrayed Jesus. Not a stellar bunch. And yet, out of them started a movement that could not be stopped more than 2000 years. Out of them was born a church that changes the world bit by bit – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, building schools and hospitals, taking care of lepers in India… And just the same, God calls us from our Nazareths to continue God’s good work here on earth.

God brings to fulfillment God’s promises and life incarnate in Nazareth. The places that we would not consider looking, the people we would not consider worthwhile, are often the places God chooses. It is from our Nazareths that God calls us to “come and see.” It is from our Nazareths that God calls us to change the world and bring God’s kingdom. God calls us to salvation and healing from the places where nothing good can happen. These are the places where reconciliation and love are revealed in relationships. Words of forgiveness and compassion are spoken by people we assume could never say such things.

Where are you from? Or maybe, a better question, where are we from? Because ultimately, we are all from the same place - we are from dust – from soil and from earth; made from the same stuff that the rest of the universe was created. We are from Spirit and from God’s breath – created in God’s very own divine image. All of us; all of creation – everything, every person and every place and every situation.

So, this week, take some time to ask the question, “where are you from?” Ask someone you don’t know quite so well, or are estranged from, or maybe don’t know at all. Take time to listen and to share. Take time to be vulnerable or to take a risk and to step out of your comfort zone under the fig tree. Come and see… find relationship as you leave assumptions behind. Come and see that more is happening in Nazareth than we ever thought possible. It is not just “anything good” that comes out of Nazareth. The One who is Good comes out of Nazareth.