

## Making the light shine

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC, on January 14, 2018

[http://lectionarypage.net/YearB\\_RCL/Epiphany/BEpi2\\_RCL.html](http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Epiphany/BEpi2_RCL.html)

The old hermit stood on the edge of the cliff, looking down to a city way off in the distance. It looks like a busy hub of activity event from a long ways off. The old man turned to his new protege and says in a matter of fact, English accent: “The Mos Eisley spaceport. You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy. We must be careful.”

That is one of my favorite lines from the original *Star Wars* where Obi Wan “Ben” Kenobi is trying to help Luke Skywalker and their two droids, R2-D2 and C-3PO, get where they need to be. Old Ben isn’t really wrong, of course. Mos Eisley is a like a lawless town in the unsettled American West. But despite its status of “wretched hive,” Ben & Luke find not only what they want, but more importantly, what they need and what they least expect. In fact, I would argue that they ended up finding their own salvation and eventually bringing peace to that mythical land in a galaxy far, far away.

There’s an important question posed in today’s Gospel reading by a man named Nathanael, known as Bartholomew in other gospels. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” he said. You can almost see the sneering snark in his voice as he asks that question. Surely there is some territorial, community pride in Galilee that caused Nathanael to look down his nose at Nazareth, to disparage someone he hadn’t even met, who his friend Philip had said, “this might be the Messiah, **and** he’s from Nazareth!” But can anything **good** come from Nazareth? Can anything good from the Mos Eisley Spaceport?

But that’s what makes this story so compelling, isn’t it? We know what and who comes from Nazareth, and Philip and Andrew and Peter are starting to figure out who it is they’ve encountered **and** the fact that he’s from a backwater after-thought of a village.

Our scripture readings, especially the Gospel readings, throughout Epiphany serve as a powerful reminder that God does not look or act the way we always expect God to look or act. The Old Testament is full of those stories, too, like the one we hear from First Samuel today. Eli is the learned old priest who has served God faithfully all these years, and yet it is the young boy Samuel who God chooses to convey the dire message to Eli. Samuel, who was brought to live in the Temple not because of his own faith but the faith of his mother. He has likely learned a few things here and there, but he, at least in the Scripture stories we have, has not proven himself as a faith-filled

young man, and yet that's whom God chooses in this moment. The unexpected, unrepresented, out of the box choice.

The Magi, the Three Kings who visit the toddler Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, come from out of the way places seeking a king. Naturally, they go first to the Palace, but they quickly learn that Herod's Palace is no place for a child. So they find a child, in a house, with his mom. Not where you'd expect to find a king, let alone a Messiah. The odds are about the same as **expecting** anything good to come out of Nazareth. But it's that word **expecting** that should trip us up, stop us where we are, and cause us to think back on the whole history of God, and see how God rarely, if ever, does what we "expect."

When Nathanael asks his question about that undesirable town of Nazareth, Jesus - God made flesh- does what God often does when we let our prejudices show though: Jesus surprises Nathanael by showing him he knows him, deep down, to his very core, his innermost parts. And he calls him out for his leap to conclusions instead of his leap of faith.

The holy season of Epiphany is about finding all those out of the way, less-desirable, seemingly-unholy places where the light of Christ is waiting to be seen. And in many cases, the light of Christ doesn't need to shine **on** those places. The light of Christ needs to shine **FROM** those places. We need to be the ones who help remove the obstacles and barriers that keep the light of Christ from bursting through and bringing hope and healing and peace to the hearts of those who most need to experience it.

Many of us have known people who brought the Light of Christ. But how many of us have known people who helped uncover the Light of Christ? And it's totally OK to say that YOU are one of those people. But we have here at Christ Church an amazing example of the Light of Christ shining from the darkness after it was uncovered by one of our own.

If you have ever been in the Chapel of Christ Church, you have likely see the hand-painted Stations of the Cross, images depicting Jesus' ordeal from his trial to his crucifixion. They were drawn by a Haitian artist named Jean-Marie. Despite countless trips by Christian missionaries over the past 400+ years, Jean-Marie still grew up having not heard the story of Jesus. His art was discovered by a nun who asked him to paint the stations. She told him the story of the cross and showed him statues. As he was asked to draw these images of a Savior he did not yet know, obstacles were being removed so that this young man could share and be the light of Christ. Later, our own Bev Fawcett and Sonja Doran, members of this parish, were God's instruments in bringing those Stations of the Cross to Christ Church. Because Bev and Sonja knew that like Nazareth, good things, holy things, sacred things come from Haiti. Good people. Holy people. Sacred people.

When we discount and discard whole swaths of people because their land seems less desirable, less worthy, just Less Than, we discount and discard the hope that God has placed in all people, and we attempt to negate the power of the Almighty.

The season of Epiphany and in fact all of the story of God's people throughout history tells us that no thing and nobody can keep the light of Christ from shining in and on and from the darkest, most unexpected, least desirable and least hospitable places. For it is in those places that God's work most thrives!

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