

*January 18, 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 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.'*

I have a cousin who adopted 2 girls from Kazakstan. 3 full-grown trees gave their lives to provide the paper for the documents that they were required to fill out. Among the gazillion questions asked, one proved to be especially challenging: He and his wife were asked to list every place they had ever lived. For some of us more "stationary" types...that wouldn't be too tough. I joke with people that I've essentially moved the length of Canandaigua Lake in 56 years - which amounts to about 1/3 of a mile per year!

But my cousin was in his 40s at the time and had lived a bit. He was born in San Diego, spent a short stint in Central America, moved to Rochester, than back to California then back to Rochester, and had rented a slew of apartments in these various locations before eventually buying his home. For each location, he needed to the provide address, dates of residency, and reason for leaving. He loved those little girls but...bureaucracy - not to mention "writer's cramp" - almost killed the deal.

Background checks are not uncommon. People like to know where we've been. Even in casual encounters with strangers...a frequent question we ask when we're getting to know someone is "Where are you from?" or - a bit more

stilted – “Where do you hail from?” Years ago, I had a professor who was getting to know the class on the first day of the semester, and he turned to me and asked me “What is your provenience?” I thought to myself, “Well, I haven’t a clue...but I hope I learn it by the time FINALS roll around!” He just wanted to know where I grew up...

Much is made of where we come from. Our ancestors came from Plymouth. Our ancestors came from Dublin, or New Delhi, or Nairobi. People are fascinated to trace their lineage back, often across at least ONE ocean...if not more.

As one comedian quipped, “Our family goes way back.” Most do. But evidently there’s something ENTICING about knowing where a person COMES from. Maybe we think that if we know where they CAME from...we might be able to guess where they’re HEADING TO...perhaps even a clue as to what they might SAY...or DO.

Scholars have determined that Nathanael was from Cana. Philip, Andrew and Peter were from Bethsaida. Jesus was from Nazareth. Maybe they all played each other in soccer, who knows? But evidently there was an undercurrent of distrust or suspicion, such that Nathanael pipes up with: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

When I was a kid, towns had their reputations: Geneva was dangerous; Bloomfield was full of hicks; and Pittsford was for snobs. Over the years, I’ve met farmers from Pittsford, professors from Bloomfield, and musicians from Geneva...so

those reputations have largely unraveled. My prejudices sort of eroded away in the face of lived experience.

Of course, for Nathanael, at the very moment before he met Jesus, he HAD no lived experience with the Rabbi – just a vaguely negative view of Nazareth. So...what a shock it may have been for Nathanael to hear those first words out of Jesus' mouth: when, upon seeing Nathanael Jesus exclaims, "Now there's an honest man!" Maybe Jesus sensed that Nathanael was a straight-shooter, if a little bit prejudiced. Nathanael's response was to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God! Talk about a bad start turned GOOD! Nathanael goes from bigot to believer in 15 seconds!

The ancient near-east was not known for rapid change. The pace of life in that era was generally pretty slow. But apparently ONE thing COULD change in an instant: that being...the human heart. I believe it can TODAY, TOO. We can't change where we came from. We can't change what we've done...or what we HAVEN'T done. We CAN, however, change...the tilt of our heart.

New Year's resolutions abound this time of year...though as January drags on...many resolutions find their way to the curb...to be picked up with the rest of the trash. Perhaps ONE resolution worth SAVING has to do with tossing out our BOXES. Not the boxes that held the Christmas wreath...or Aunt Martha's fruit cake. But the boxes in which we put people...or places...or ideas – those ever-so-confining boxes, like Nathanael's, that nearly robbed him of an encounter with God.

There weren't many pieces of machinery entrusted to me in my days at the old Star Market on West Ave. in Cdga. But one absolutely essential tool...used with regularity...was the box-cutter. It was a sharp devil, and worthy of great respect. But used wisely, it could make the life of a shelf-stocker like me ever so much easier. Boxes have their place. But their lives needed to be limited...so as to show forth the full glory of their contents, whether the contents are pears, pomegranates, or people.

Three (3) people of some historical note have connections to our region. Three people who were box-cutters – people who did not allow themselves or others to pigeon-hole them based on where...or WHAT...they came from. One was Martin Luther King, Jr. who studied for a time at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School. I may have sat in one of the chairs he sat in. If so, I can only pray that some of his courage rubbed off on me!

Susan B. Anthony in nearby Seneca Falls called for the demolition of the box that deprived women the vote. And Antoinette Brown Blackwell refused to be boxed off from the pulpit by the partitions of male-dominated clergy, becoming the first woman to be ordained in America, right up in little Butler, NY. Right here in this little corner of the world, in Monroe, Seneca, and Wayne Counties, box-breakers that led the way for all sorts of fresh encounters with God.

Now, just to inject a bit of levity for a moment, not ALL boxes are bad.

Eugenia, a woman who had lived all of her life in the hill country of West Virginia, made her first trip to a big city at age 70. When she arrived and got her first look at the skyscrapers, she couldn't believe her eyes. It was like a dream – a wondrous, magical fairyland. Her friend Hattie met her in the lobby of a big hotel and, after Eugenia had been registered, the two women stood in front of an elevator with shiny, brass sliding doors.

Eugenia watched in amazement as the magic doors parted, revealing a compartment lined with mirrors. She trembled as she watched a tired old man who must have been in his 80s slowly shuffle into the compartment. She wondered what was happening to him as she watched the lights over the door blinking on and off: one...two...three...four...five. Then the blinking stopped. But soon it began again: five...four...three...two...one.

And once again those magical doors opened and out came a young man with a spring in his step and the look of a GQ model. Eugenia seemed both awestruck and delighted at what she had just seen. Then she clapped her hands with glee and whispered to Hattie, “I'm gonna bring my husband here and put him in that magic box.”

Nothing wrong with the occasional magic box...with all its rejuvenating power!

But if we take seriously our brother, Nathanael, we do well to discard MOST of those boxes and claim the full freedom that is ours...the full freedom that is due ALL people.

As we do, I have every reason to believe that we “will see greater things than these!” That is my prayer. Amen.