

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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I was in a museum not long ago gazing at a painting of Jesus washing Peter's feet, a familiar scene to most of us, and wondering why it seemed very wrong. What was wrong was that Jesus was pictured as a mature but young man while Peter was very old and gray. We forget that, if Jesus was in his early thirties, it is likely that his disciples were no older and probably younger by several years.

Page down Facebook until you come to the inevitable shot of a group of young adults in their mid-to-late twenties having a good time, and that's more like it. Which brings me to the lesson from John that many of us will hear this Sunday. It's the one where Philip takes Nathaniel to meet Jesus. Nathaniel wonders if anything good can come out of Nazareth. Jesus allows that he's finally met an Israelite without guile. Nathaniel wants to know how Jesus knows him. Jesus says that he saw him sitting under a tree. Nathaniel announces that Jesus must be the Son of God and King of Israel. And Jesus ends it by saying he hasn't seen anything yet.

You know that story. The thing is, we take it so seriously. I just don't see it that way. To me it's a play between two young men feeling each other out through humor. I hear a good-natured smirk in Nathaniel's question about whether anything good can come out of Nazareth. His announcement of Jesus as Son of God and King of Israel has all the earmarks of something Shakespeare's Puck might say as an aside to the audience. Moreover, I hear Jesus playing along in the same good humor, yet with a note of authority that cannot be escaped. Yes, there is more to come. You have not seen anything yet, but you will. Come along with me.

I have my own wonder about things. Why do we find it so hard to let Jesus and his followers be young men and women who can be playfully serious or seriously playful? Why do we so often insist on such a heavy-handed reading of scripture that we can't see the humor and laughter that surely must have been a part of their lives? I tried that thought out a couple of years ago on a small group of older Christians, including a couple of fundamentalists, who were horrified that I was not showing proper respect for Jesus, and not giving God's word the weight it deserved.

Jesus is cited as saying that he came to give us life in abundance. I can't imagine life in abundance that isn't rich with laughter. Most Saturday mornings I have coffee with a friend of mine who teaches philosophy at a local college. There we are, surrounded by familiar acquaintances and friends, having a good time laughing at the nonsense of life that surrounds us every day, and rarely saying anything important about either theology or philosophy. To be fair, we sometimes comment on the sillier aspects of each. It's a few moments of an abundant life lived the way I think Jesus and Nathaniel lived it so long ago.

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