

Can Anything Good Come To Nazareth?

John 1: 1-18 (:46)

It's been nearly fifty years ago, now. I was a young college student, and I was in Bethlehem. Through a series of wondrous and odd coincidences, I had found myself in the Holy Land. I won't go into those coincidences, but in the years since then I have come to know that such a string of events is not coincidence at all; it is providence, the invisible guiding hand of a loving God.

Standing there, I was struck by two things. First, there was the awareness of just how urban so much of it is, bustling bright and full of life: teeming streets, traffic, crowds; life, appropriate for the birthplace of The Life, for the birthplace of God's living presence among us in Jesus. The second thing was an opposite tug. There is an awareness that comes with the very air you breathe of an ancientness. This land has been much lived in, not just in history, but in pre-history. That awareness gets into your bones and changes your perspective; also appropriate for the land where God has been a knowable presence from before the beginning of history.

Traveling there, where Jesus walked, the prophets spoke, and God broke into human history changes you. It changed me. You may leave it, but it never quite leaves you. It's still with me, even now. That's appropriate too, though. After all, it is the Holy Land, set apart, different. There are a few places, though, even in the Holy Land where all that wonder can get cut short. Take Nazareth for instance. It's a "must see," of course, as our Lord grew up there. But Nazareth can also be a challenge if you're not reminding yourself of why our Lord came to earth in the first place. If you prepare yourself, remember God's purpose, the wonder can still break through; even in Nazareth.

A Bible dictionary calls Nazareth “an insignificant agricultural village.” Nazareth is never mentioned in the Old Testament, nor in Josephus’ extensive writings, or even in the writings of the prolific rabbis. It’s not surprising then, that Jesus’ Nazarian origins were held up for scorn. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” scoffers asked when they saw Jesus. (John 1: 46) Poor Nazareth.

Even today as you see Nazareth from the highway, it’s a bit of a sprawling dry mass of stone and concrete houses built on a hill, with abandoned cars, and olive groves. Once you enter, it becomes a morass of clogged streets with cars, dust, tourist buses and honking trucks. Nazareth is about half Israeli, half Arab. The feuding groups have lived in this town in relative calm, though hardly love. In the busiest parts of the tourist season, tourists are disgorged by the innumerable busloads, and are herded up the hill to poor Nazareth to view the Church of the Annunciation. Because of the congestion, the tourist buses must wait at the bottom of the hill. On foot, pushing past the tourist traps, and trinket shops, the hawking vendors, it’s something of a slog up the hill to the Basilica, the church built over the ruins where Tradition holds that Mary and Joseph’s house once stood, and Jesus grew up. The pushing, the jostling, and noise of crowded humanity do not lend themselves to thoughts of wonder, even inside the beautiful Basilica. In the midst of all the human distraction, it is possible to completely miss what this site is saying to us. It is possible to say with the ancients, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

But then, just there, trudging those steps, tourist behind tourist, my eyes fell upon a quote, chiseled in the wall. It was in Latin, but words so familiar, anyone could read it: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Those words caught and turned my thoughts completely around. Those words, when caught, will do the same for every one of us, wherever we are, whatever we are about, because they focus us back on why our Lord came in the first place.

You see, we all really live in Nazareth. We may journey to Bethlehem to worship the New-born King, but we still have to come home to Nazareth to live. Call it Capitol Hill, or the DMV, or New York, or Los Angeles, or Atlanta, or anywhere else in any other part of this world, anywhere humanity dwells, it's all Nazareth. Maybe, the real question is not, can anything good come from Nazareth, but can anything good come to Nazareth?

You and I are gathered here this morning, this fifth day of Christmas, to celebrate the birth of a baby who is Christ the Lord. Let that thought capture your thoughts. It means, in him, God became flesh and blood, flesh and bone, living dust, incarnate, among us. Us! We need a God who doesn't mind living in places differing groups live only by means of uneasy peace, where vendors hawk their wares, and horns honk, and everything else happens that goes with being human. We, who live in the Nazareths of human existence, we need an incarnate God. Need God to be with us; to walk with us, to guide us, to make God's love known to us, and felt in us. That's what it all means: God has come into our Nazareths as human and divine; to make God's love known and experienced, to make you and me know that we are loved.

When you leave here after this hour of holiness, take one thought with you as you go back to the Nazareth you call home: the one who came to Nazareth; his name was, and is, Immanuel, God with us; God with *us*! "And the Word became flesh and dwells among us."