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# NAZARETH?

JOHN 1:43-51

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL  
ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 17, 2021,  
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

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“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael asks. Nazareth? with a shocked look on his face. You’ve got to be kidding me. Nazareth? Really? There’s no Starbucks in Nazareth so it can’t be a town of any real significance. It’s not a bustling urban center with commerce and finance and high rise buildings above the horizon with lots of job opportunities and a kickin’ night life. Nazareth was a small rural village perhaps with a population of 500-2000 people, located in the hill country of Galilee, known for fishing and farming, known for having more Gentiles, which meant more foreigners. Pastor Jeremy Troxler said, “apparently nothing much happens around Nazareth. Nothing to make the news. They apparently don’t even have a sign on the edge of town that says, “Welcome to Nazareth, home of . . .” Of course, it would be blank or empty at the end of that phrase because it’s believed that there’s nothing of worth in Nazareth. Nazareth? Former Harvard minister Peter Gomes said, “Nazareth is not the site of great expectations.” But now you’re telling me that the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel, has come and he’s from Nazareth? No way. Nazareth is the backside of the backyard of nowhere; it’s the insignificant of the insignificant. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? John Wesley cautions us to guard against these “popular prejudices” which in this case makes Nathanael suspect Jesus to be an impostor just because he’s from Nazareth. Prejudice and stereotypes about Nazarenes undergird Nathanael’s question. Martin Luther calls Nathanael “a dunce” for asking it. Can anything good come out of somewhere different than where I’m from geographically, theologically, denominationally, racially, ethnically, educationally, and politically? Can anything good come from *those* people? Those Republicans, those Democrats, those liberals, those conservatives? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Out of another location, another experience, not my own? Out of another human being who is not me?

Do we think nothing good can come out of anyone or anything else if it isn’t us—our race, our ideologies, our theologies, our perspectives, our interpretations? Maybe we judge Nazareth because we’ve never been there, never been on the other side of the tracks, never been on the backside of the backyard of nowhere. We’ve never experienced Nazareth and don’t know it nor its people; we’ve only heard about them on podcasts or a YouTube video clip or the nightly news. But we don’t know any Nazarenes for ourselves, which is what leads to that question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” It sounds so elitist and entitled. Can anything good come from over there when I’m over here?

Well, there are Nazarenes who live there. I even have one on my staff here at the Chapel—a Nazarene, denominationally. Nazarenes are human beings. Jesus was situated, located in human flesh somewhere, a real place, with real people, with struggles and beauty like everyone else. Human beings live in Nazareth. Have we forgotten that? They may not look like us or talk like us or think like this, but there’s no need to defecate on them just because they are from Nazareth. But what often happens to Nazareth? Banks are removed from there. Prisons are built there. Schools don’t have adequate educational resources there. The cycle of poverty flourishes there. Highways are built through their town, just because it’s Nazareth.

We forget as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us that “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality; tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” We forget that Dr. King also said, “that there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.” Yet we still wonder, “Nazareth?” We judge a book by its cover therefore judge someone by the color of their skin and not the content of their character. We judge Nazareth and Nathanael judges Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.

Some historical accounts about Dr. King say that he often carried Howard Thurman's book *Jesus and the Disinherited* with him when he travelled. Thurman was in college with Dr. King's father and the two families were close for decades. Historian Vincent Harding tells us that Dr. King "likely had the message of [this book] etched on his heart." And do you know the emphasis of this book? It's on Jesus of Nazareth and how Jesus was a poor Jew living under Roman oppression, a disinherited Nazarene living in poverty, whose spirit gave the oppressed, those whose backs were against a wall, courage while he pronounced the good news of freedom to them. Jesus shows us that the Christian way is loving liberation not nationalistic domination.

Remember, Dr. King's final mission was in Memphis, Tennessee, fighting on behalf of disenfranchised sanitation workers as part of the Poor People's campaign. Can anything good come out of poverty from the disinherited? Out of Nazareth? King recognized that garbage collectors were also human beings with gifts to offer the world. They might not have thousands of likes on social media or be a part of the upper echelons of society, but they are children of God, created in the image of God, and that alone gives them worth, value and dignity as a human being, even if they come from Nazareth.

What Dr. King knew and Nathanael learned is that there are gifts and even God in Nazareth. Nathanael eventually recognizes that the incarnate Word from Nazareth is the flesh of God, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? It's a lesson in knowing that that which you may despise and disregard may be your source of salvation. Don't despise Nazareth. It may be where God resides. Nazareth offers gifts and God to the world. Jesus of Nazareth. Nazareth? Yes, the backside of the backyard of nowhere. And good comes out of Nazareth!

Nazareth is amazing or at least Jesus, the Nazarene, is. Because regardless of your stereotypes about Nazareth, look at what and who comes out of it for you. In the end, we see what we might expect happens to poor Nazarenes or those associated with them. We see a cross with the sign above his head reading, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." His power saves, serves, loves, and resurrects. It does not kill, dominate, hate, and insurrect. These days, all eyes are on Capitol Hill, as if that's where the power is, when our eyes should be on Nazareth. Don't underestimate Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth. That's where the real power is. You just 'come and see.'