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Epiphany 2B – January 14, 2024

“Out of Nazareth”

Read: John 1: 43 - 51, Memorize: John 1: 46 NLT

Many of the postings of the ten best and ten worst of the year past and the year coming come now. It's very natural, but it does give an interesting color to this time of year. You see them on television, on the news and entertainment shows. At least that's where I run across a lot of them. It seems like it's mandatory that we hear about them.

They are often the same, although it's interesting to see when people disagree on the best and ten worst. Most of these lists are pretty subjective: ten best movies, ten worst videos, ten best books, ten worst dressed, ten best friends, ten worst investments, ten best colleges, ten worst places to live. I could go on, but I think you get the idea.

Sometimes, the distinction between “the best” and “the worst” are separated by the thinnest of lines. It's kind of like that story about the child who finally announced that the emperor was not wearing a beautifully tailored set of clothes, as he has been told, but was actually buck naked. Until someone decrees that something is the best or the worst, we really may not see it that way.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear from Nathaniel, that Nazareth is on the worst list. The soon to be disciple responds to the information about Jesus' pedigree with a snooty sounding, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathaniel's nasty knock on the town has led generation after generation to assume that Nazareth was famous for being infamous.

However, there's a little surprise here. I looked up Nazareth in my Blue Letter Bible commentary and the name Nazareth appears nowhere in the Old Testament. So how does Nathaniel come by his opinion that it's the worst place?

Granted it was a small, dusty, insignificant village of stone homes struggling to stay solvent. It was unremarkably undistinguished and unconsidered. It wasn't even remarkable for being unremarkable. It was what it was.

That is, until John recorded Nathaniel's dismissal of "no-good-thing from Nazareth." From the viewpoint of the twenty-first-century we can never properly see Nazareth. Our vision of Nazareth will forever be squeezed and squinted through Nathaniel's dismissal. So why did John feel it was so important to preserve this rotten reputation for poor old Nazaeth. What does a bad rap for Jesus' hometown offer us?

And then I came across this idea that the Gospel writer's opinion of Nazareth is about verbal intensive care to a world that needs a savior who is accessible to all. You may not have ever heard this term. I had heard about it vaguely, but then went looking.

Verbal intensive care offers believable, accessible words to people when they are in the midst of a terrible crisis or seemingly unconscious. Instead of denying the situation, verbal intensive care addresses the immediate needs of the person.

Let's say you are the first person on the scene of a hit and run accident. There is a natural inclination to want to reassure the person. Sometimes, people go as far as shouting, "Don't die, don't die," which is their fear and perhaps that of the injured person. But that does not offer much reassurance. Nor is promising that "everything is fine" or "you're going to be ok" going to ring true either.

Verbal intensive care tells the truth: "I know you're in pain. I know you're injured. An ambulance is on the way. You're not alone." Everyone one of those are truthful statements. They promise nothing beyond what is real. Nor do they scare the living daylights out of the person by warning them not to die, over which they have no control.

Nathaniel's statement, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" is the verbal intensive care we all need to hear. It tells the truth to all of us, because we all feel like we are from Nazareth. The best evidence that proves America is not quite a clearly classless society is our just about across the board conviction that we are all born, "on the wrong side of the tracks."

For some, those "tracks" are made of money. We were born genuinely poor; perhaps we still are. For some, the "tracks" are made of social characteristics. We are not

“socially acceptable” somehow – into those categories we put those who are slow, sad, too different, wimpy, moody or who are too loud.

For some, those “tracks” are physical – we are too fat, too skinny, too ugly, too smart, too handicapped or any other too you can apply. So, in our souls, we are all coming out of our own “Nazareth.”

Nathaniel’s question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth,” can be rephrased in 2024 in this way: Can anything good come out of my depleted 401K? Can anything good come out of my pink slip? Can anything good come out of my spouse’s death? Can anything good come out of my child’s addiction? Can anything good come out of the Gaza disaster? Can anything good come out of the Ukraine mess?

The answer that we have, as Christians, turns us back to the reminder that we are not alone. It is in these “worst of times” and the “worst places” of our life, that God’s presence pours into us. When you are at your lowest ebb, destitute, disinherited, bankrupt, damaged and damned, then and there, God wants to do His greatest work in you.

That is why, just when you think everything is coming to an end, that you can come to see that everything is just beginning. That is what Paul called the Word of the Cross in 1 Corinthians 1: 18, which is really the wisdom of God. What some saw as the tragedy of the cross, God used to accomplish His greatest work, the redemption of all people.

E. Stanly Jones, a Methodist missionary, was one of the greatest missionaries in Christian history. He was born on Jan. 3, 1884 and at 24 became a missionary to India in 1908, where he lived and loved almost until the day he died in 1973. Jones was offered the Episcopal office, but declined it in favor of his missionary work.

He wrote his last book, “The Divine Yes” at the age of 83. His age is not what makes the book so remarkable. You see, Jones wrote the book, “The Divine Yes” after suffering a severe stroke that paralyzed him. In the last fourteen months of his life, Jones was convinced that God wanted him to produce another book, this “Yes” book.

He was unable to write and hardly able to see or speak. With the help of his daughter, he dictated the book as best he could into a cassette recorder. The book stands as a summary of this world-renowned evangelist work, a “last will and testament,” is how Jones called it.

The book begins as strong as a book can: “Jesus is the yes, the divine yes.” It became his best-selling book and the one for which he is best known. And you might say that this book was written from “Nazareth.”

Working out of “Nazareth” is always a hazardous commute. When God is “up to something” in your life there are two things you can count on. Martin Luther described the first certainty – “Where God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel.” Evil is active and will gladly move in to add more chaos, for the devil thrives there.

The second certainty we can cling to is that God will do his greatest work in the worst of places. God does God’s greatest work in the worst of times; in the worst of people. God does God’s greatest work in the worst place in you. In the deepest, darkest hole in your soul, that is where God will send the deepest roots of redemption and forgiveness. That is where Jesus hangs on the cross for you.

When you are at your lowest ebb. When you are at your worst point. When you are most destroyed, destitute, disinherited and bankrupt; when you are the most damned and damaged, God reminds you that you are His child.

Then and there, God wants to do God’s greatest work in your life. When you think everything is coming to an end, everything is really just beginning. Remember Philip’s invitation: “Come and see for yourself.” In coming to see Jesus, Nathaniel came out of Nazareth. We all come “out of Nazareth,” but “out of Nazareth” comes as a blessing to us, so we can bless others.

Count me in: What or where is your “Nazareth” that God is bringing you out of?