

Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?
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(Matthew 24:36-44 NRSV) "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. {37} For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. {38} For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, {39} and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. {40} Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. {41} Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. {42} Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. {43} But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. {44} Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Advent is here, in just 23 days, Christmas will be upon us. Over the next few weeks, we are going to take a moment and look at some of the places of the nativity and seek to see what they have to say to us today. Just a reminder, next Sunday at 9:45 our children will be presenting their Christmas program — ***Angels, Lambs, Ladybugs and Fireflies***, we hope that you will come and join us.

But this morning we are beginning our look at the places of the nativity by taking a visit to NAZARETH.

Nazareth was a small insignificant village in the Galilee at the time of Jesus. Nazareth was so insignificant that it is not mentioned on any lists of the towns and villages of the Galilee.

Most people believe that Nazareth had a population of a couple hundred around the time that Jesus was born.

People lived in a small area, and houses from this time have been found in excavations of the area. What is interesting is that the houses that have been found from the time of Jesus are not houses as we know them, they are caves. In other words, people who lived in Nazareth at the time of Jesus, lived in a very primitive way.

The archeologists have found some evidence of olive presses, but for the most part, the people who lived in Nazareth had to find work elsewhere. Fortunately for Jesus' family, there was work to be found close by.

In all likelihood, Joseph and the other men of Nazareth probably would make the hour and a half walk every morning to the neighboring city of Sepphoris.

Sepphoris was the capitol city of the Galilee, and was a booming place in the years before Jesus was born. It would have provided the men of Nazareth with a steady job — not as carpenters, as the Greek word *Tekton* is often mistranslated. But as stonemasons which is a better translation.

Our best guess is that Jesus was born before the death of Herod the Great which took place in the year 4 BCE.. Following Herod's death, uprisings began throughout the country — in the attempt to throw off the oppressive Roman rule.

One of those rebellions took place in the city of Sepphoris. There, according to Josephus in his book: the *Jewish War*, a rebel named Judas "raised a considerable body of followers, broke open the royal arsenals, and, having armed his companions, attacked the other aspirants to power."

Rome, not surprisingly sent in troops to quell the rebellion, and Josephus tells us: they "routed all who opposed him, captured and burnt the city of Sepphoris and reduced its inhabitants to slavery."

Nazareth was less than four miles way from Sepphoris — what do you think happen to that small village the day the Romans came?

Josephus doesn't tell us — but we can infer from what we do know that the Roman legions did to other small villages.

For the people of Nazareth, there was most likely two choices — they could either escape into hiding places, or most likely the men were murdered, and the women and children enslaved.

If they did go into hiding — when they returned home, they would find their homes and lives destroyed.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth after 4 BCE.

This was the defining moment in the life of the people of the area. You might say that it was their 9-11. I have no doubt that this experience defined the

world that Jesus was born into.

It is into that context that we are told that a young girl, 13, 14, 15 years old —> engaged to be married — comes home one afternoon and announces to her future husband and to her parents that she is pregnant.

But as if that isn't bad enough — she also tells them that she is pregnant, not by her betrothed — but by the Holy Spirit.

And she told them this story:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you.

She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

He will be great,
be called 'Son of the Highest.'
The Lord God will give him
the throne of his father David;
He will rule Jacob's house forever—
no end, ever, to his kingdom."

Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man."

The angel answered,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
the power of the Highest hover over you;
Therefore, the child you bring to birth
will be called Holy, Son of God.

I don't know about you — but I am not sure how I would react if one of my girls came home with that story.

That's not true — I think I know how I would react. — Probably the same as most of you.

A pastor was addressing the children during the Christmas service. "Who is the mother of Jesus?" he asked them.

Without hesitation, dozens of tiny voices chorused back, "Mary."

"That's right. Now who can tell me who is the father of Jesus?"

There was quiet and fidgeting. After all, no one had told them there was going to be a quiz. Then a young girl spoke up. With assurance, she boldly announced: "It's Virg."

There were several seconds of silence. Then she said, "You know, Jesus' parents: Virg an' Mary."

But we need to fast forward some thirty years or so. Jesus is now an older man, thirty years old or so, and has lived longer than the average life expectancy for his day.

He has begun preaching in the communities surrounding Nazareth, seeking to find Disciples who might follow him on his revolutionary journey.

In John's Gospel — Jesus has just called Peter to join his group, when a band of men who were disciples of John the baptizer were talking.

(John 1:45-46 NRSV) 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." {46} Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

Nazareth was an insignificant town — not a place that you would expect to find the one about whom Moses and the prophets spoke about.

If you continue with the story, you find Nathanael confessing belief in Jesus and his desire to follow and become a disciple.

Jesus says to him —> You haven't seen anything yet!

What kind of response do we have when God comes calling us, and inviting us to join up?

Maybe we're like the woman who called a pastor's home very late one evening, "May I speak to Martha, please?"

"There is no one here by that name," the pastor replied. Click! The phone went dead.

A few seconds later the phone rang again. It was the same lady. "May I speak to Martha, please?" Again the pastor replied, "There is no one here by that name." Click! The phone went dead a second time.

Only a few seconds later, the phone rang a third time. "May I speak to Martha, please?" The pastor replied, using all the restraint he could muster, "Lady, there is no one here by that name. Maybe you are dialing the wrong number."

"Listen, sonny," the lady replied. "I am not dialing the wrong number. You are answering the wrong phone!"

Mary knew who was calling her.
Nathaniel figured it out pretty quickly as well.

What about you?

Do you hear the voice of the one calling you?

Can anything good come out of the region?

I once heard a powerful story about a hungry child who prayed earnestly one Christmas for food and toys, but nothing happened. She related her prayers to a cynical friend, who asked with a sneer, "What happened to this God of yours? Why didn't he hear and answer your prayers?" To that the child answered simply, "O, I am sure God heard me and told someone to bring me a Christmas gift, but I guess they just forgot."

There is more than childish naiveté in her reply.

The problems in the world are not the fault of God.
God is not the cause of hunger or injustice.

What good can come out of the region?

A great deal — if we will do our part and like Mary and Nathaniel, become partners with God in making a difference in our world.