

I Met Jesus ... He's from New Jersey

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Matthew 2:19-23

Something I noticed when I went to Seminary was that some of the students were quick to point out that, even though they were living in New Jersey at the moment, possibly even for years, they wanted you to know that they most assuredly were not a Jerseyan nor do they plan to become one.

A good example of this was that my new seminary friends and I briefly got a fellowship group together but quickly other members of the group began to refer to our meetings as the “New Jersey Support Group” and, being a Jersey-girl, I found myself having to defend Jersey over and over again.

Yes, I do happily sit in my car at gas stations. Thank you very much. I got defensive about being asked, “Can anything good come out of Jersey?”

But see, Nazareth was kind of like the New Jersey of the Ancient Near East. It wasn't generally people's first pick of a homeland, it's an agricultural area, it tended to be referred to as “insignificant”. In fact, in the Gospel of John, Apostle Nathanael even asks “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Defending Nazareth is like defending Jersey, not Joisey.

But since we know the direction this story goes, we know that Jesus becomes known as “Jesus of Nazareth”. Christ's “homeland” is questioned relentlessly throughout his life. But this morning I want to backtrack to how Jesus became known as being from Nazareth.

The identity of God becomes associated with an overlooked area that people just passed through. But in today's text, Bethlehem-resident, Joseph is sent to Nazareth to settle down after being moved around from place to place to place. With that, he, Mary, and most importantly, Jesus, have the identity of Nazorean's put on them.

It's not where they were born, it's not even where they want to live, but it's their home nonetheless.

"There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'"

This is what I'd like to talk about this morning: finding God where you are, even if you're not where you want to be.

And to do this, it's helpful to gain a little context about this story. This Matthew text isn't very obscure in this post-advent season, Bishop Schol analyzed the beginning of the chapter on Epiphany Sunday; but it isn't usually the focus of the birth narrative. Picking up information throughout the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Joseph had to go back there to register for the census. But Matthew alone gives us insight into how this family became known as Nazoreans.

See, Herod the Great is told about the birth of a new king by the Magi. Despite the façade that the Roman government keeps putting on, Herod knows that his power is very fragile and he is threatened by the news of an infant's birth.

But he plays coy, "when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay homage." And the wise men are like, "yeah sure." So they set out and track

Jesus down, but in a dream they are told not to tell Herod, so they just - go home. The Wise Men had, in essence, tricked Herod so that Joseph, Mary and her newborn can escape the evil plan Herod the Great has brewing; and where do they go? Well, oddly enough, Joseph brings them to Egypt, which we know as an area that the Israelites escaped from.

And there's no way to gain a full picture of the story that we're looking at without confronting what Herod does when he finds out he's been tricked. The section of text that leads into this morning's reading is often called, "The Massacre of the Infants."

Herod feels so threatened by this baby, that he begins slaughtering innocent children. **Jesus is born into a very real world, a world that suffers at the hand of human fear and greed.**

This is not a Cinderella story, the baby escapes in this text, but we know the Romans will crucify Him.

When wrestling with this troubling text, I couldn't help but think about the fact that the parents of these infants back in Bethlehem, these were Joseph and Mary's friends. These were their family members and people they made home with. This isn't just some massacre happening off somewhere that you hear about on the news and feel bad:

Joseph and Mary knew these kids names,

They knew their faces,

They knew how they sounded when they cried for their mothers. Yes, Jesus escapes but that doesn't mean there is no grieving happening, no survivor's remorse.

When we tell this story, we focus on Christ making it to Nazareth, but this story has a different tone if you're a childless parent, just as the stories of Jesus healing the sick are great unless you're sick and have never been healed.

So what do we do with that?

Christ was born into a very dangerous world. And because of this, He will not be known from the place he was born or the place where his family is from, even if He wants to. He will be known as "Jesus of Nazareth" because it's his last option. Because Joseph heard they'd be safe there.

Being misplaced is not unique to this text. I bet a number of us have had a couple of bible stories pop into our minds of people who are not where they want to be. Dream Coat Joseph...

Hagar... Jonah for sure... Daniel... Esther... Paul. We know, though, that God was with all of them just as God is with all of us.

But Joseph's choosing of Nazareth is so interesting. Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, and when Matthew, who loves referencing the prophets, states that their going to Nazareth fulfills prophecy, he's most likely alluding to the fact that a Nazorean is of the messianic branch of David's line. Basically that means that Jesus is a descendant of King David, who was prophesied to be the ancestor of the Messiah, and by Jesus living back in this area, he's where that line of the Davidians were. And Nazareth was a wide mix of different kinds of both Gentiles and those of the Jewish tradition. By Christ being raised there, it meant that He was surrounded by, and could minister to, a wide mix of people.

It's also important to point out, that in this text, Joseph planned on returning to Bethlehem. When Herod the Great dies, he thinks, "we're in the clear". **But Joseph is a very informed person**, he goes to head back because an angel told him "you're good", but then he hears that one of Herod's sons has taken over that area, and he's just as bad if not worse. So he is redirected again, and Joseph chooses Nazareth, though it was not his first, second, or third choice.

There's many scenarios that would put each one of us in the category of "not being where you want to be", particularly in this environment of COVID. Our physical homes may be the last place we want to spend time at the moment since we've been in them so much. Perhaps you're where you are totally by accident, it wasn't your choice, it was chosen for you. The place you call home may be very far away. It may be a place you'll never see again. Or perhaps you feel misplaced because you're at a job you don't like, you're at you're second choice school, you've been put in a nursing home or had to move in with someone else because of your health. Perhaps you feel misplaced and have no idea where your place is.

But when I think about people I've met that are most definitely not where they want to be but, have found God where they are anyway, I think about many of the people I've met when visiting detention centers.

One guy I talked to ended practically every thought, even if he's talking about the tragedies in his life, with "but I'm still so thankful to God." Another talked about how he sees the work of God in how communities have taken care of his children while he can't.

I think about when I've visited nursing homes, and had people tell me about how much they don't want to be there and how much they miss their old home, only to then tell me about their faith and how God is present in their lives.

I think about my own mother, who over the past two years of her life spent most of that time in a hospital bed until she passed, and to the end she could clearly articulate the ways God was active throughout her suffering. I think about her not being able to come to a family lunch, my father falling to pieces at the table because of how their illnesses have made it so that they never can have more than five minutes of being happy before the next wave of bad news came.

I think about how he ended that breakdown by saying something along the lines of, "But how amazing it is to learn that it wasn't all just a sham. Everything that I've learned God to be, it's all true."

It turns out something good can come out of Nazareth.

It turns out you can find God.

We don't know if Joseph whined and complained about having to move again, especially having to move to Nazareth. What we do know is that he made the move, made Nazareth home, had lots of children, worked as a carpenter, taught Jesus to be a carpenter.

What we do know is that they were surrounded by broken homes and distraught families. And yet, in the no-where village of Nazareth, where the mysterious refugee family kept to themselves, God was more present than many thought was possible. God was living among them.

My friend's mother, a devout Lutheran, is a Clinical Nurse Specialist, and she shared with me her experiences with one of her patients who has macular degeneration so she can't walk, has chronic pain, is blind and is hard of hearing.

She struggles a lot with the loss of her independence and the fact that she can no longer go to church. She had never married and had no children but loved her nieces and nephews as if they were her own. She even called one of their new babies her grandchild. Well, after her parents died she moved into their house, but when she was put into a nursing home her nieces had no choice but to sell the house along with just about everything inside it. It was everything she had.

The nursing home is not her home, so before COVID hit, her pastor would visit her every week to talk about the bible since she can no longer read for herself. But in this tough situation that she was forced into because of her health, there have been two very specific ways she has found God in that nursing home.

One is that she began to make friends with a man in only his fifties that was there because he had a horrific stroke. She shared her faith with him and slowly but surely, he began asking questions, and wanted to learn more so he began meeting with her and her pastor for weekly bible studies also.

And the other way she has experienced God is out of the kindness of her nieces and nephews and how they can make her feel at home anywhere. In her past, she enjoyed writing cookbooks that she would just get spiral bound down at the local store, and she would draw illustrations on them – and she would just give them away.

Well, one day at the nursing home, her nieces and nephews surprised her by holding a reception and book signing for her. There was a raffle, and food, and she was asked to give a speech, and people even bought some copies of her book. Her loved one's taking the time and putting in the effort to create a loving home where she was forced to be, is something she raves about to everyone she meets. She found God in her new home.

Despite all the wrong in the world, we are not alone even when we are misplaced, or hurting, or grieving, or suffering. We are not alone even when we are not in a place we feel comfortable calling home, or when the people who are home to us have had to stay away for almost a year now. God is no genie. There's no magic set of words, or quota of prayers to reach in order to have everything you've ever wanted. But God can be found. Even in New Jersey.