

January 11, 2015

## NAZARETH

Matthew 2:19-23

Death was the reason Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt, and, death is the reason they returned. It was Herod's paranoia that ordered the slaughter of male infants two years old and younger in the area of Bethlehem; and, it was Herod's death that made it safe again. And yet, because Archelaus, Herod's wicked son, had replaced him in Judea, it was still dangerous. Another son of Herod was the tetrarch over the northern area: Philip. He wasn't so bad. So Joseph took Mary and Jesus to the northern part of his country, most often referred to as Israel. They went to the region of Galilee to the obscure town of Nazareth.

The northern area had been invaded over and over, conquered again and again. The Israelite tribes of this region had not only been decimated, but many of the people were taken captive to the Assyrian lands east of Israel. They were to be subservient to their captors. This episode in Jewish history is called the *Babylonian Captivity*. In time, their descendants would be allowed to return to Israel, but in the meantime, the Assyrian rulers displaced the captives with captives from other conquered lands, like Media.

Galilee was, therefore, a sort of melting pot of a few different cultures. By the time of Christ, the land had been conquered by the Greeks, and then the Romans, and the Romans were in control when Christ was born. Several scholars describe Nazareth as a town that was more complicit than most with respect to "getting along" with the Romans. Perhaps the people were too laid back to resist the inevitable, and so they just chose to be agreeable. Perhaps they felt the arrangement with the Romans was only temporary, why not just make the best of it. Most Jews felt this way – they got along with the Romans outwardly, but they secretly hated them and couldn't wait for them to be gone – hoping that a messiah would come and drive them out, and return the kingdom to Israel. (Acts 1:6)

Of course, Joseph and Mary were *from* Nazareth, according to Luke's Gospel. (1:26, 2:4a) How Joseph, who may have had an inheritance of land in or near Bethlehem, had come to live in Nazareth is unknown. He was an artisan, a carpenter, not just a laborer, so he would have gone where there was work. Curiously, a big Roman city called Sepphoris was being built only a few miles south of Nazareth, and Joseph may have been able to apply his trade there. Supposedly, Mary was from Sepphoris. Anyway, rather than return from Egypt to Bethlehem, where Joseph had had to "register" because "he belonged to the lineage of David," (Luke 2:4b) to be safe, they just went back to Nazareth.

Some scholars, because the root of the word *Nazareth* means *branch*, make a big deal of how this might be another fulfillment of prophecy: Isaiah 11:1-3 – "A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse (David's father), and a branch shall grow out of its roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding; the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord..." Apparently Matthew doesn't feel this is as relevant as the notion that Jesus would "be called a Nazorean," (Matthew 2:23), according to the prophets; and yet, this "prophecy" has no known source. Personally, I don't think either issue is as

relevant as the fact that Bethlehem was where Jesus was born, “*for out of Bethlehem will come a ruler who will be the Shepherd of my people Israel!*” (Matthew 2:6b; Micah 5:2)

To me the reason Nazareth is relevant is because it is “every-town,” as well as “nowhere.” Being Every-town makes it our town, my town, this town, any town. It is as common as common can be. It had regular people like you and me, with regular jobs, living regular lives. It, in many ways, makes Jesus one of us!

On the other hand, Nazareth is “Nowhere-ville!” When I received the phone call a month before my years at Seminary in Denver were over, from the District Superintendent, to tell me what my first appointment would be, I got out a map. He told me I would be serving two churches: Brookville and Elkhorn. After he gave me some guidance as to its location (I didn’t even know where Rockford was), I found the little dot that said Brookville, but, I told him that I didn’t see the town of Elkhorn five miles south, where he said the second church was located. Then he told me that there is no town of Elkhorn, just a church. Well, I was glad and excited and I rejoiced to know that I had an appointment, so I thanked him up one side and down the other. But later I thought that I was going to “the middle of nowhere!” Even so, it was a blessing, just like Nazareth was for Jesus, Joseph, and Mary. It’s just that sometimes you want to be *somewhere*. Nazareth was nowhere! It was no place to go to and nowhere to be. It had no respect because of its complicitous-ness with the Romans. Its people were nobodies. In fact, when Philip told Nathanael that he had become a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael responded: “Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46) So even if our town was nowhere-ville, Jesus is, again, one of us!

Jesus came out of nowhere. He came out of virtual obscurity. He was one of us. He was ordinary...at least until He was in His late twenties. Later on, He would leave Nazareth and live in Capernaum. (Matthew 3:3) It’s curious; some might say that Jesus put Nazareth on the map. But the people of Nazareth would have said, “We are on the map.”

And for us... We are on the map, because Jesus is here. He is not just one of us; He is all of us, because we are His Body, the Church!