

"Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?"

John 1:43-51

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For the second week in a row, we are looking at a remarkable portion of scripture containing one of the most important questions to be found anywhere in the Bible. John informs us that immediately following his baptism, Jesus sets out to select for himself a group of disciples. Before long, he attracts a group of fishermen, including Andrew and Simon Peter, who are sufficiently intrigued to want to know even MORE about this man. When Jesus encounters Philip the next day, he is SO persuaded that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah that he can't wait to run and tell his good friend Nathaniel the good news. After informing him of their discovery, that the identity of this man is Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth, Nathaniel develops a strange look on his face and asks, "Jesus? Nazareth? Nowhere in the scriptures is there any mention of a Jesus or Nazareth. Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

During a trip to the Holy Lands almost forty years ago, our tour bus visited Nazareth, the town that Jesus grew up in, and I saw a land so unpromising, a terrain so poor, so rocky and hilly, that it is basically used for sheep grazing. Yet, Philip is here insisting that from off those same hillsides the great hope of the Jewish people has come. Nathaniel can hardly believe it. After all, few had ever even HEARD of Nazareth- a town so small, so insignificant, so inconsequential that it's not even mentioned in the Old Testament nor found on any maps. He might expect the Messiah to come from Bethlehem where some seven centuries earlier the prophet Micah had predicted he would come forth, or even Jerusalem, the "City of David," but NAZARETH!

When I was a minister in Iowa, Rose and I visited the Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri. The more I have learned about this man over the years, the greater my admiration for him has grown. As a lover of history, I had read David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography on Truman- McCullough being one of America's great historians who grew up in Pittsburgh and even has one of her bridges named after him. In it, he tells how he was a failed haberdasher from Independence, Missouri; a short, near-sighted man without any college education. In fact when he married Bess, it was HER family that was distressed, convinced that her new husband would never amount to much. In fact, the reason Roosevelt selected him in the FIRST to become his Vice-President WAS because he was regarded as politically harmless and unknown to so many. Writes McCullough upon his assumption to the presidency following the death of Roosevelt:

"To the country, the Congress, the Washington bureaucracy, to hundreds of veteran New Dealers besides those who had gathered in the Cabinet Room, to much of the military high command, to millions of American men and women overseas, the news of Franklin Roosevelt's death, followed by the realization that Harry Truman was President, struck like massive earth tremors in quick succession, the thought of Truman in the White House coming with the force of a shock wave. To many it was not just that the greatest of men had fallen, but that the least of men--or at

any rate the least likely of men--had assumed his place... 'Good God, Truman will be President,' it was being said everywhere. If Harry Truman can be President, so could my next-door neighbor... For thousands of men in the ranks, as for many at home, the question was not so much was Truman qualified, as who WAS he."

This man who was responsible for the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, NATO, the Berlin Airlift; the President who first recognized Israel, established the Defense Department, started the CIA, who decided to proceed with the hydrogen bomb; this one who sent the first civil rights message ever to Congress and desegregated the armed forces--Harry S Truman--is now hailed as one the greatest Presidents America has ever had. "The man from Missouri" appeared such an unlikely character; a humble, unpretentious man who seemed to offer so little promise. CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME OUT OF NAZARETH? Could anything good arise from out of such small and obscure hamlets as Plains, Georgia; Dixon, Illinois; or Hope, Arkansas? Could anything promising originate from a short, near-sighted, failed haberdasher from Independence, Missouri? Church, you tell ME!

The question Nathaniel asks of Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" is actually part to a much LARGER question. What he wants to know is "How can hope arise when there seems to be no evidence of promise given?" a question we may have asked OURSELVES more than once. For instance, during the 18th and 19th centuries, Pittsburgh became one of the richest and most powerful cities of her day, the result of having two major rivers come together to form what was then the largest "interstate highway of its day" along with the discovery of one of the largest coalfields in the U.S. that would lead to the production of large iron plants. From 1870 to 1910, her businesses experienced a golden age unlike any other as the city's population grew from about 86,000 to almost 534,000 in those four decades. Her iron was used in projects all over the country as the value of her goods grew greater than the value of goods from Detroit and Cleveland combined. By 1911, Pittsburgh made 24% of the country's pig iron, 24% of its steel rails and 53% of its crucible steel. However, all that changed when in the late 1950's American companies began importing cheaper steel from overseas like Japan, By 1970, 75% of the corporations headquartered in Pittsburgh were gone. Eventually, the steel industry completely collapsed, leaving half of the nation's steelworkers unemployed such that by the year 2000, 29 steel companies in Pittsburgh were forced to declare bankruptcy.

Pittsburgh had entered into a death spiral. Homes were being auctioned off in the city for as cheap as a dollar while her rivers became so polluted and her air so thick with smog from the few remaining steel mills, that people found themselves at risk of all kinds of heart and lung disease including asthma, cancer, and even adverse birth outcomes. She had developed the reputation of a post-industrial nightmare, a tumbledown slum where no one would want to live anymore. Pastoring north of here back in the mid-80's, whenever I mentioned her name, you could almost hear people gasp, "PITTSBURGH! Can anything GOOD come out of that city?"

But how times have changed! Pittsburgh is now HOT! A growing mecca for millennials, she regularly earns a place on the list of "best cities to live" and "coolest neighborhoods in America," while being being hailed as the next tech industry hotspot. Pittsburgh now has a cleaner environment and a far more diversified economy than the one it had

only a half century ago as the region now attracts tourists and even producers in the film industry. The biggest employers in the city are in the fields of health care, financial services, and higher education. The region is also attracting tech companies, with Google, Apple, Intel, Uber, Facebook and RAND establishing offices here. Carnegie Mellon's Robotics Institute, founded in 1979, and its National Robotics Engineering Center, which helps commercialize technologies invented on campus, have given the former Steel City a new reputation as "Robot Town."

The quality of life here in Western Pennsylvania is every bit as good as anywhere ELSE, if not, BETTER. Housing is still affordable for anyone wanting to set down roots here with real estate being about half of what the SAME would be in areas like New Jersey or New York City. Although no longer possessing as large a population as it once had—having gone from the 8th largest city in America to now 66th—we still maintain all the benefits and advantages of cities much larger with our first-class health system and world-class museums, a great symphony along with being a center for the dramatic arts, and three major sports teams to boot. In addition, the city boasts of outstanding restaurants and micro-breweries, a thriving art and music scene, fashionable neighborhoods, and a lively downtown. And so once again the refrain is made, "Can anything good come out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the answer is "YOU BET IT CAN!"

Perhaps the question you've had to ask yourselves lately is one that goes, "Can anything good come from such an old mainline congregation as the Presbyterian Church which, like so many OTHER religious bodies is experiencing numerical and financial decline, where it is seeing many of her congregations close because they can no longer pay their ministers a full-time wage or keep up with the day-to-day expenses?" For many, it is a constant battle with peeling plaster and leaking roofs to go with a merry-go-round of changing pastors every couple of years. Can anything GOOD come from such small churches and a STILL-older denomination as our own?

That was a question that was frequently asked of my church in Waterloo, Iowa. At one time, she was one of the largest congregations in the entire denomination with a membership of close to three thousand persons. There were multiple services on Sunday and the facility, which took up an entire city block, was in constant use throughout the rest of the week. However, that all changed by the early 70's, with her major employers shutting down or moving out and the city torn apart by race riots and civic unrest. The unemployment figures in the region doubled and then tripled while the entire downtown area, once a thriving center of economic activity, became a ghost town as businesses migrated to the glamorous new shopping mall that opened just on her outskirts. Waterloo soon found herself on life support.

But the CHURCHES didn't close down- in fact, they DOUBLED their efforts. When I arrived, the membership rolls were down to around 400 persons, and though we were longer the mega-church we once were, the members of First Pres said to themselves, "Christ is still here and there is yet much ministry that has yet to be done!" I along with our Deacons regularly visited those in the hospital, sent birthday cards, distributed cookies and friendship baskets to our shut-ins as well as delivered lilies and poinsettias to them at holiday time. Because our fellowship included some gifted seamstresses, a group got together each week and made beautiful quilts which I would then take to our shut-ins as well as to members in the hospital. Meals were delivered to those who were often unable to cook for themselves. At Christmas

time, we filled box after box with toys and clothes along with assorted hats, mittens, and scarves knit by our members which were distributed to children and the poorer families in our area. We had persons from the congregation who served as mentors to struggling children in our school system as well as CASA volunteers who performed advocacy work on behalf of broken families.

We started a ministry we called More Than Fashion which outfitted women with beautiful clothing free of charge, especially to those who were poor or had recently been incarcerated and were trying to get back on their feet again. In 2009, after Waterloo and the Cedar Valley experienced the second worst natural disaster in U. S. history after Hurricane Katrina, we renovated a portion of our downstairs so we could host visiting workgroups from around the country who for weeks at a time would assist in the rebuilding efforts in our area. We contributed labor and building supplies for the construction of new homes through Habitat For Humanity and participated each year in Love Cedar Valley, performing random acts of kindness throughout the area for no other reason than to show God's love. Each week, we provided meals for Waterloo's Hospitality House, where the city's homeless could clean up, do their laundry, receive a meal, make use of the internet, and receive counseling if they wanted it.

Meanwhile, we had a regular corps of volunteers who would come in each week and fold bulletins or mind the phones when the staff was out of the office. There were the Willing Workers—a group of retired men—who gathered every Tuesday to tackle a variety of projects from plumbing and carpentry to light electrical work to help keep our facility in good order. We donated free space in our facility to an organization that would offer guidance and resources to newly-arriving immigrant families into the area. We had a Helping Hands Fund which distributed thousands of dollars every year to persons needing assistance with their utilities at graduation each spring, we offered a \$7,500 scholarship to some deserving high school senior getting ready to head off to college. Not LEAST, we offered a prayer chain manned by members of the church who could be contacted any time of the day or night to lift up individual concerns before God. That congregation was full of ministering angels and I have no doubt that their help, regardless how lowly or insignificant their contribution may have seemed to some, remained GREAT in God's eyes. And so the answer to the question of whether anything good could come from First Pres in Waterloo or any OTHER church in the world that STILL strives to fulfill Christ's commission to visit the sick, feed the poor and show the love of God to whomever darkened their doors, is and ALWAYS WILL BE an unqualified YES- a THOUSAND times yes!

Or let's take this question even one step FURTHER and ask "Can anything good come from persons so common, so ordinary, so inconsequential as you and I might be? After all, we're just common people leading very common, very ordinary lives. We put our hours in at work, pay the bills, put food on the table, enjoy a little TV in the evenings, and then go to bed. Our time is mostly filled with a lot of dull routine, and aside from our families, our church, our friends, and maybe the persons we work with, there's nothing spectacular about them. The bottom line is that we're not much more than a common group of folk from a small locale in more rural part of the county. Hence, you're not going to tell us that something good can come from persons as minor and as inconsequential as WE might be, are YOU?"

OF COURSE it can! Nobody is ever just "common" to God. Each one of us is so very

special in his sight. Though society may brand us as unremarkable and insignificant, to GOD, we will always be his cherished children. It bears repeating that God could never love Jesus--his only-begotten Son--any MORE than he personally loves you or me, and if there had been only ONE person in the world who was a sinner and in need of redemption, Christ would have STILL gone to the cross, even if it was all for just one individual. Believe me, the criteria which the world might use to determine what a real success is or not is not the same as GOD would use. None of us may be a CAPTAIN OF INDUSTRY but each of us is certainly rich in OTHER ways- rich in love and joy and patience and goodness. None of us may be a GREAT SCHOLAR but we are still blessed with a knowledge and wisdom from above more valuable than any of those fancy letters before or after our names. And none of us may be a POWERFUL LEADER but at work within us--the power of FAITH and HOPE and LOVE THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT—is a force that is FAR MORE effective in shaping human lives and the course of history than any of history's mightiest armies.

Yes, we ARE just a very common people in what has become a very common church but in God's eyes, that in fact plays to our benefit. You see, God can ONLY use the things in the world that ARE common to accomplish his purposes, and if that is the case, then a LOT of good can come from us and from this body and it DOES! The Word gets faithfully preached, Christ gets worshiped, the sick get prayed for, the hungry are fed through our financial contributions to local missions- all things that the epistle writer James says is religion "pure and undefiled." Similarly, when we think of our individual lives, if we're not taking a shut-in shopping or doing volunteer work at the local hospital, then we're visiting the nursing homes or comforting a grieving friend- all things God considers TRULY WONDERFUL in his eyes. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you're too common, too ordinary, too inconsequential to be of any use to God. Wear such slander as that as a badge of honor, for if something good COULD come from such a barren and non-descript place as Nazareth, then surely something good can come from such ancient and semi-rural places like the Deer Creek and Pleasant Unity Presbyterian Churches; and if anything good could come from a group of ordinary fishermen, then most assuredly something good could and it DOES come from lives as common and as seemingly insignificant as yours and mine. Let us pray...

Gracious God, whenever we think we ARE something, it is THEN that we find ourselves in trouble. We then think we're too valuable, too important to do the common and dirty work you have called us to do, that makes up the common everyday work of your kingdom. Rather, may we know that we're nothing more than common clay, but clay that can accomplish great things when we allow ourselves to be molded into persons after you own heart and for your OWN purpose. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.