

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Welcome to Nazareth

Psalm 139.1-6, 13-18; John 1.43-51

Russ Dean, January 18, 2009



Around the time William Jefferson Clinton was inaugurated to the U.S. Presidency, a picture of a road sign made its way around national papers and the late night talk shows. Republicans especially enjoyed the picture. Just below my home town, near Little Mountain and Pomaria and Newberry, South Carolina, lies a little hamlet called Prosperity. Fine name for a town, I think. And somewhere just on the outskirts of town, at an intersection on S.C. Highway 56, the markers point to Prosperity, this way [point →]... Clinton, the opposite direction [point ←]. (I guess some of that humor is lost in January of 2009, though, isn't it!?) According to some, nothing good could come from Clinton -- according to Nathaniel, nothing good could come from Nazareth Certainly not the Messiah.

This is not the only incident that indicates that where you were from mattered much, especially if you fancied yourself the Messiah – or if someone else were trying to prove that case for you. Later in John, the gospel writer records an exchange, following one of Jesus' many contested lectures in the Temple. We read:

When they heard... (the teaching he had given), some in the crowd said... “This is the Messiah.” But some asked, “Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? (Galilee means, literally, “circle of the Gentiles”¹) Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem... So there was a division in the crowd because... (of where he lived)... (John 7.40-44)

Anyone who knew the scriptures, and apparently Nathaniel did, knew where the birth of Messiah would take place, for centuries before, the prophet, Micah, had said:

¹ William E. Hull, *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, “John,” p.225.

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah... from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel... (Micah 5.2)

Can anything good really come from Nazareth?

Though many have never questioned it, the actual birthplace of Jesus is something of a controversy among serious students of scripture. Of course, in the story as we love to tell it, Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem... because there was no room in the inn... because the town was overflowing... because of Caesar's census during the governorship of Quirinius... because Mary and Joseph traveled there because Joseph, the father, was a descendant of King David. A careful reading of the gospels indicates the source of the issue: Mark and John contain no birth narrative, and assume Nazareth as Jesus' hometown with no mention of Bethlehem at all. Matthew seems to assume Bethlehem is the original hometown; the later move to Nazareth is to avoid the holocaust of male babies by Herod. Luke alone tells the tale we know and love it.

Historical and archaeological evidence hardly add clarity, for there are no records to indicate a Roman census at the supposed time of Jesus' birth. A census of Quirinius was conducted, but the historical record points to a time when Jesus would have been nearly a teenager. Recent archaeological evidence even questions the existence of a living town called Bethlehem, near Jerusalem – though excavations have uncovered a Bethlehem in Galilee, just a few miles from Nazareth, that was alive and well at the time of Jesus' birth.²

Reading in search of historical and literary accuracy, and with a willingness to see anew our much-beloved literal telling, a picture unfolds of a story that perhaps developed over time, just as a Christology was developing about Jesus, a story that would tie together all the Old Testament prophecies, and harmonize any apparent discrepancies. How he could have been

² Though this information was familiar to me, and can be found in any number of commentaries, I found an interesting summary by B.A. Robinson at <http://www.religioustolerance.org/xmaswwjb.htm>.

called a Nazorean... and be born according to Micah in Bethlehem and sojourn into Egypt to fulfill a prophecy of Hosea³, etc... etc... Well, it's a complex story, and I am fascinated by the discussion, and our faith should not waiver at all, regardless the outcome of the scholarship.

But the point for today is that the skeptics of his day could not see Jesus for who we know him to be, because of Nazareth. They could only see what they already expected. And they only thought possible what they had already seen. They read scripture with a preconceived understanding. (Maybe we do, too.) Accordingly, nothing good could possibly come out of an unknown backwater village called Nazareth – that's what the text said.

God knew better.

But some things never change.

On October 7, 2001 the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom, a campaign aimed at the Muslim extremist groups, Al-Qaida and the Taliban. This war, now in its eighth year has still failed in its primary objective, to capture or kill Osama bin Laden. We begin teaching our children, even before they can walk and talk, that the appropriate response to conflict is not to hit back, yet as fully grown men and women, some of the bravest, some of the brightest, some of the free-est in all the world, we have not learned to practice what we preach. Instead of seeking some new, challenging but creative strategy that might, literally, have changed the world, we struck back as children do, and are now mired in a conflict that has cost nearly a thousand coalition troops, and the lives of perhaps 13,000 Afghans, including 3,000 civilians.⁴ The President elect indicates his intention to increase troops in this inhospitable terrain.

³ “*Out of Egypt I have called my son...*” (Hosea 11.1).

⁴ Perhaps we should have consulted the history books to remind ourselves that the Soviet super-power made the same grave mistake, seeking to fight in such inhospitable terrain, only to pull out with no clear victory after a dozen costly years. Initially Soviet deployment of the 40th Army in Afghanistan began on August 7, 1978. The final troop

From March 20 to May 1, 2003 we sent 248,000 of our sons and daughters to invade Iraq, a small country we were told had aided and abetted the 9/11 attacks, and represented a grave threat to U.S. security of. I will not recount the nearly six years of shifting justifications or outright lies (whichever your perspective), or the 2080 days of war without end – since the President declared our Mission was Accomplished. But the 4,209 U.S. troops, and the estimated 30,000 Iraqi troops and more than 600,000 civilians killed in this fighting should be mentioned.⁵

In October 2008 Amy Belasco, a Specialist in U.S. Defense Policy and Budget documented the \$864 billion estimate for the approved costs of waging our wars since 2001.⁶ A year earlier, CBS News reported a Congressional Budget Office study that projected total costs, including death benefits and costs not normally counted, at upwards of \$2.4 trillion dollars.⁷

Through 2006-07, as the bubble in the U.S. housing market burst, sending housing prices downward, a sharp increase in mortgage defaults resulted, causing a cascade of financial failure that was considered unthinkable only a few months ago. The failure of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, AIG, Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, and the takeover of Wachovia Bank all correspond to a 47% drop in the stock market between September 2007 and last month – an \$11 trillion loss to the U.S. economy. If your retirement funds have lost value, well, you are in good company, as U.S. retirement accounts have taken an estimated 32% loss, or \$2.8 trillion.⁸ The \$700 billion

withdrawal began on May 15, 1988, and ended on February 15, 1989. Due to the interminable and inconclusive nature of the war, both *The New York Times* and *Time* have referred to the conflict in Afghanistan as the Soviet equivalent of the United States' Vietnam War. www.wikipedia.com, "Soviet war in Afghanistan."

⁵ Statistics on casualties have been difficult for me to find and feel comfortable that I am reporting correctly. Many of the sources seem either to underestimate the number, in order to give support to the President's initiative, or exaggerate the number of deaths, in order to further vilify the President. Though the site (<http://www.unknownnews.net/casualties.html#afghanistan>) is certainly not friendly to the current administration's war efforts, in reading the information supplied, I have been satisfied that a modest count is presented, an estimation which relies on a number of credible sources. Regardless the "body count," my point remains – too many people have lost their lives in this war.

⁶ <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>

⁷ <http://cbs3.com/topstories/iraq.afghanistan.war.2.412516.html>

⁸ <http://www.urban.org/publications/901206.html>

bailout package recently approved by Congress, to boost our flagging economy, may rise, in correspondence with the number of industries waiting in line now with their hands out.

Bringing all this good news right to our doorstep, this always-faithful congregation closed out 2008 with an unprecedented deficit of \$55,000.⁹

Welcome to Nazareth!

The list of challenges that face the first African-American President in the history of this nation is daunting. As he begins his leadership of this country on Tuesday, he needs our prayers. And as we as a community of faith begin another year of worship and service together, we too face challenges. Can anything good come out of this Nazareth?

In an email sent to one of his anxious pastors just a couple of weeks ago, a prophet in our midst said it well. "I trust we will come through this crisis as a better church. That we will learn from this challenge. But we will do so only if we remember that real faith requires real work."¹⁰ So you need to pray for Barack Obama and the administration he has assembled. You need to work for peace every way you can. You need to commit to become a better-informed citizen, a more active participant, locally, nationally, globally. And you need to pray for Park Road Baptist Church. You need to pray with your heart... your mind... your soul... and you need to pray with your feet and with your hands (Mark 12.30), and with your consistent, steady financial support, whatever it may be.

⁹ I allude here to a phrase that Amy and I have come to use rather consistently in regard to financial accountability, "Let us be found faithful." Though faith is not just about money, we have come to believe, as one of our mentors taught us, that if you want to know about someone's spiritual life, find out what they do with their money. This is true regardless one's wealth, note Jesus praise of the widow who gave only a "mite" (the smallest coin in the currency) (Mark 12.41ff). Because our money is so important to us, and deemed "necessary," the measure to which one is willing to give, freely (whether to the church or to other charitable organizations), probably is as good a measure as any of our spiritual faithfulness.

¹⁰ Parks Helms's actual words were: "I have great faith that we will come through this experience as an even stronger church for 'becoming disciples through worship and service' (this is our church mission statement)... As long as we remember that real faith requires real work. May it be so."

Your staff and lay leaders have met and will present a program of change, for your approval in a February 1st conference, in this room. And though none of the recommended reductions in our Annual Ministry Plan will come without cost (the loss of one, important annual trip for our youth... the loss of one special performance of music by our choir, and no musicals for our youth or children this year... reductions in mailing and printing and scaled back office procedures and postponements of needed repairs... and the loss of any salary increase for your staff)... Though all of these reductions will be felt, specifically, as we try to minister together this year, I am convinced that Parks Helms is right: in ways we cannot yet see, we'll become a better congregation for having lived and trusted and worked through this experience.

Can anything good come out of this Nazareth?

It is the steadfast conviction of the people of God: Yes. Where we least expect it, Yes. When we are least able to do it for ourselves, Yes. Out of the darkness of fear and uncertainty and loss and even death... God brings unexpected life. Yes.

From a little backwater hole in the road called Nazareth came a prophet of such vision, a teacher of such authority, a healer of such power, a believer of such faith and conviction that he gave everything he could not keep to gain something he could not lose.¹¹

And he changed the world.

His life and his death and his resurrection bid us believe today that there is no Nazareth that God cannot use for immeasurable gain. Can anything good come out of this Nazareth? I know it's going to take a lot of work... but I can hardly wait to see what God does have in store.

May it be so!

¹¹ From my anonymous source file: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."