

“Good Out of Nazareth”

John 1: 43-51

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1st Sunday—Carbondale Community UMC

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?. . . Come and see.

Phillip encounters Jesus. Something about that man from Nazareth brings Phillip hope for all the people of Israel. Phillip meets Jesus and believes. He runs to his good friend Nathanael and breathlessly says, “We have found him about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. . . it’s Jesus, son of Joseph from (I know, of all places) Nazareth!”

Nathaniel steps back and looks at him askance, as though Phillip has just told him that spinach tastes just the same as chocolate. He looks at Phillip like a teenager looks at a parent when prohibited from driving the car. “Do what? Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth, much less the Savior of the world?”

You see, Nathaniel didn’t hold Nazareth in high esteem for many reasons. First of all, Nathaniel was from Cana, a rival town just up the road that presumed itself to be a much better place than Nazareth. Secondly, Nazareth was a completely unimportant rural town of about 500-2000 people. It was located not far from a major East-West trade route that ran from Egypt to Asia called the Via Maris; picture it like one of the small communities you see exit signs for off of that trade route from east to west we call I-70.¹ Nazareth had a population of fisherman and farmers and a large number of immigrants and foreigners. Thirdly, archaeological evidence shows that Nazareth sat in the shadow of a nearby prosperous town of Sepphoris. Sepphoris was the regional capital at the time of Jesus. It was the place of action, of money, and of entertainment; Sepphoris was the place to be and be seen. And Nazareth. . . well, Nazareth was downvalley in everyway. Nazareth was just an

¹ Jeremy Troxler, “Nazareth,” sermon on May 21, 2007 at Thriving Rural Communities Aldersgate Gathering of Duke Divinity School

insignificant village overshadowed by its more prosperous and worldly neighbor towns.

When Phillip tells Nathaniel that their Messiah was from the hillbilly town of Nazareth, it's no wonder that Nathaniel's response is, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

And yet, wonder of wonders, Jesus did. The God whom we celebrate becoming incarnate at Christmas came in the flesh from a rural mountainous town. The wonder of God becoming one of us includes that God grew up in Nazareth, of all places.² Jesus likely attended synagogue, recited the Torah, and learned scripture in a no-account town. It was in Nazareth that scripture says that Jesus "increased in wisdom and stature and in divine and human favor." As Lawrence Wood reminds us, all the rest of his life Jesus would carry with him the name of his hometown—on the lips of crowds, demons, and angels, he would be called Jesus of Nazareth.

The greatest gift the world would ever receive, Jesus, was the gift from the nurture of a rural community. God's choice for God's own self to grow up in a small town means that God has a heart for the Nazareths of this world. God loves those places that stand in the shadow of Sepphoris, or of Aspen, for that matter. God believes those places deemed insignificant by the world still have great gifts to give to the world, and to the church. God's spirit remains alive in small places—places like Carbondale.

But can any good come out of Carbondale? Specifically, can any good come out of Carbondale Community UMC? Certainly this rural church in a small town has gone through times of great change and suffering. You've struggled through transitions with different pastors, you've struggled to even find pastors to work in this rural, but very expensive community. At times it's been hard to pay the bills, to keep the building intact, to keep the doors open.

² insight comes from Rudolf Bultmann.

I tell this history not to be a downer, but to be truthful about the challenges of being a small church in a Nazareth. Across the country, United Methodist Churches in small communities are struggling. Health insurance rates for pastors decimate their budgets, old physical plants suck down all their resources, and aging populations lack the vitality to maintain congregational life. Rural churches struggle with the difficult issue of how to welcome the sojourner or foreigner in our midst, many of whom don't speak English. Small churches are faced with the tough decision to either consolidate with a nearby parish, or to close their doors.

To add to such sufferings, the United Methodist Church has decided to focus its energies on a new campaign called "New Places for New People" to fund new church starts or plants in growing urban areas. Our district superintendent, Steve Goodier, introduced this program to us last week at our charge conference meeting and collected an offering. Now, growing the church remains a wonderful project. Establishing new Christian communities in places with burgeoning, young populations makes sense, and is an extension of our call to go forth and make disciples of all people. Such work is beautiful and should be blessed with resources.

Yet such a campaign, and the tough realities of being the church in forgotten small places leads to Nathaniel's question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" . . .

Do you remember what Phillip said to that question? "Come and see." Phillip invites Nathanael to come experience the One who has come to save him. Something about that man from Nazareth gives him hope. Nathanael meets Jesus and believes. He glimpses Christ's future resurrection; indeed at the end of the gospel of John Nathanael is mentioned as one who sees Jesus resurrected. In this young man from the insignificant town of Nazareth Nathanel recognizes his own Messiah. By the end of our pericopy for today

Nathanael confesses “You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel.” This babe of Bethlehem and boy of Nazareth offers his gifts of love and grace, and Nathanael and the rest of the world have never been the same.

Can any good come out of Carbondale, out of this church? Come and see. Come and see a community that God still loves and cares for. Come and see a church where God calls the people to respond to the challenges of being a rural church with creativity and faithfulness. Come and meet the Jesus of Nazareth who brings hope. Come and see that a place in a Nazareth can still offer Christ to world.

I’ve been very fortunate to be able to “come and see” this church before starting to pastor here. Such an arrangement is very unusual in the United Methodist Church. Usually, pastors receive appointments by the bishop and cabinet to churches in communities they don’t know. I’m grateful that I’ve gotten to experience the life of Carbondale UMC before beginning to serve. My husband, son, and I moved to this community a couple of years ago; my husband started his medical practice, Aspen Integrative Medicine, while I focused on writing my dissertation for my doctoral degree at Duke. In those two years I’ve been privileged to become a part of your community and learn from you. Can anything good come out of Carbondale? Here is what I’ve been able to see:

Come and see a community genuinely caring for one another. One of this community’s greatest gifts is its warmth and love for one another. Come and see an incredibly dedicated laity supporting their church with their prayers, presence, gifts, and service. You clearly understand that a vital church comes from the energy of its people more than its pastor, and you labor diligently to care for the life of this parish. Come and see the Trustees laboring to sustain this physical plant. Come and see dedicated volunteers offering food at Extended Table. Come and see committed Sunday School teachers offering

Christ's love to children. Come and see (in the summer) a church garden that flourishes for food to feed the hungry in our community. Come and see learning and growth in classes on Sunday morning and in groups like United Methodist Women. Come and see a church community that believes with its whole heart that God is still alive here (can I get an amen?) . Come and see the gifts of a church in a rural mountainous town. Come and see a church whose doors remain open by the grace of one who hails from Nazareth.

Even more Phillip's invitation to "come and see" to Nathanael invites us to see new visions of how God might be at work in this church. How might we, in this small town, be called to be the very kingdom of God on earth? How might we see a new future, and seeing that new future begin to believe in it, and by believing in it, one day be that future by the grace of God? How might we so be the love of God to the downtrodden, the downcast, the down-and-out of Carbondale that they, like Nathanael, can say they've seen the Son of God—in us?

Perhaps the reason God has kept this church alive is because God knows we have a gift from Christ to offer to this community. The challenge now, through our church council visioning process and the work of our committees, and especially through our own prayer, is to discern what our gift is. What is the gift we can offer to this community so that the people of Carbondale begin to say—oh, that Methodist church, they do _____. I know of a church in Leadville, for example, that was about to close its doors. It began a food ministry in its own kitchen, providing lunch every day for immigrant workers and others on hard times. Out of offering its gift, the church grew, adding members and vitality. Now the people of Leadville say, oh, that Episcopal church—it's the one with the free lunch. What is our gift that will make this rural mountainous town feel more like Jesus' hometown? I invite you over the next month or so to really reflect and pray on this question. What is the gift of

Jesus we are to offer our community, to our own little Nazareth? Then secondly to that, how am I personally called to offer my time and talent to present that gift? (repeat) Then I hope you will share what insights you receive with myself, with the members of church council, with the leaders of the church. What is our gift to offer so that others see Jesus, and believe?

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? By the grace of a God from a small town who still cares deeply for small towns you'd better believe good can. I look forward to laboring alongside you, uncovering where the Holy Spirit is calling us to be in this town. I look forward to meeting Jesus of Nazareth in the people in our community we are called to serve. I look forward to discovering with you the gift that this church is to offer to the world. (so I want your response on this) Can anything good come out of this CCUMC? (get their response) Oh, yes my friends, you'd better believe it. Let us come and see. Amen