HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Dec. 21: Carpenter’s Home in Nazareth (Matt. 2:19-23)

19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20 and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, 23 and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Luke 2:39: 39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

INTRO: “I’ll be home for Christmas” written in 1943 and sung by Bing Crosby in honor of the troops fighting in World War II.

After a number of years the Holy Family returned to “the land of Israel.” This is the only time in the New Testament that the term “land of Israel” is used. The Jews living in Egypt thought of their homeland as Israel more so than those who lived there.

That would not be uncommon, for those who are gone, absent, to idealize the homeland, to think of it in a romanticized fashion.

The land itself becomes important to those who are absent—the topography, the crops, the flocks, the weather, the mountains, the plains. These features of our homeland we often think about. We develop a longing to see that unique sunset once again, to reach the top of that mountain and scan the land the lies before us highlighted with the red and orange and yellow of the sun sinking behind a jagged horizon.

We also develop a longing for the culture, the language, the people who behave in certain ways toward others. We want to see and experience again what is familiar to us.

The Holy Family never intended to settle permanently in Egypt. They were only there because Herod the King had threatened the child’s life. When he was dead, they returned to the land of their forefathers, the land of Israel.

Nazareth was a small town in the time of Jesus. It was situated a 100 miles north of Bethlehem and 15 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. It was not really known for anything. It was a farming community. It had no significant synagogues or schools or power.

Joseph was a carpenter, a builder. He may have worked at Sepphoris, a thriving village at the crossroads of the trade routes about four miles north of Nazareth.

Herod had driven them from Bethlehem. Now Archelaus his son prevented their return.

Joseph and Mary were from Nazareth, so that is where they go.

**I. There is IDENTITY is in Nazareth**

A. People know Mary and Joseph here. It’s not like Egypt or even Bethlehem where they are truly strangers to the townspeople. In Nazareth they are identified with their family.

B. He is “Jesus of Nazareth.” Among the boys named “Jesus” in Israel, this Jesus is distinguished by being from Nazareth. It is a small town. Few of its residents have achievd any notoriety.

1. Most people would find comfort in being known.

2. Some prefer the anonymity of a city full of strangers, but for most, “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name,” as the theme song of Cheers says.

C. People know Jesus here. They know his brothers and sisters. He is invited to weddings and to funerals. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked when Jesus read in the synagogue (Luke 4:22).

D. Later on the Christian movement will be called the “sect of the Nazarenes” by the lawyer who seeks to have Paul sentenced.

E. In the Quran, Christians are called *nasara* connecting them to “the Nazarene,” Jesus.

**II. There is PREDICTABILITY in Nazareth**

A. Bethlehem was a new adventure. They ended up in a stable. The Magi came from the east. They were learning the names of their neighbors and cultivating business relationships.

B. Egypt was another adventure, a departure from the path that either Mary or Joseph had walked all their lives. They were fascinated, I am sure, by the things they saw and learned in the sojourn in Egypt. Everything was new.

C. Nazareth is a return to the familiar, the routine. Nazareth is boring compared to Egypt or even Bethlehem.

1. I would expect that Joseph enjoyed the pace of Nazareth, it’s boring routine. He felt the weight of providing for his family. Here he could find work. People knew him. He had a reputation as a builder. Here he was not looking over his shoulder, trying to figure out what people were saying.

2. Mary may have been different. She might have been the adventurous one of this couple. Maybe she both celebrated and lamented the return to Nazareth. She was glad to have the help of lifelong friends and family members with her family. Surely that was good. But maybe seeing again the familiar homes and landscape, walking the familiar paths, felt to her like moving backward, into the past, falling into a rut.

D. Mary might have wished for finer schools, a more prominent rabbi and synagogue for her gifted son. She might have wished for Jerusalem—at least, Judah, where her bright boy could get the best training and be exposed the finest teachers.

1. Nazareth might have had a good rabbi. But he was probably a good pastor, friend, rather than an intellectual giant acquainted with the theological discussions raging at the time.

2. Greek and Roman ideas were bantered about in nearby Sepphoris. But Nazareth was thoroughly Jewish, content to stay with familiar teachings, distant enough from the seat of power and learning to have little concerns with modern trends and tensions.

**III. There is OBSCUIRTY in Nazareth:** **“Nazareth! Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael asked (John 1:46).** And Philip said, “Come and see!”

A. The people of Jesus’ day did not connect Nazareth to the prophecies of the OT. This is the meaning of Nathanael’s response. To follow someone from Nazareth did not make sense to him.

B. Nazareth is despised for being backward, out of touch, in the sticks. It was a blue-collar community, as we would call it, not a center for learning or trade or politics.

C. Matthew records, “So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene” (2:23). This quote is not found in the OT. Matthew attributes it to “prophets” so maybe it is the collective teaching of the obscurity of the Messiah.

D. Some think that Matthew is referring to the word “branch,” *neser* in the Hebrew, from which some think the word “Nazareth” comes (Isaiah 11:1: *A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit*).

E. The ministry of Jesus was to be unfolded “at the proper time,” just like his birth came “in the fullness of time.” At Cana, Jesus told Mary, “My time has not yet come.” His mother forced his hand that day, it seems to me, and he went public with his amazing faith and power. But until that time, when Jesus was about 30 years old, we hear nothing from him.

F. Was Jesus a child prodigy? I would say yes. The only story we have of his boyhood is his visit to the temple in Jerusalem when he was 12. There he amazed the teachers with his questions.

G. Some people believe that Jesus’ grandfather, Mary’s father, was a rabbi in nearby Sepphoris only 4 miles from Nazareth, a town of an entirely different character. Herod Antipas made it the capital of Galilee. He built a theater there. I have examined the Greek and Egyptian themes in the ancient mosaics. There were 21 synagogues in Sepphoris, someone guessed, in the first century. H. We have no record of Jesus’ education. Had he been in Jerusalem he would have been exposed to the famous and very conservative Jewish School of Shammai which dominated the Jerusalem system and still does to this day. Sepphoris was more inclined to the School of Hillel to which Gamaliel was connected and in which Paul was taught.

**IV. There is UNBELIEF in Nazareth: “No prophet is accepted in his hometown,” Jesus told the people (Luke 4:24).**

A. The familiar is often despised. People are always surprised when a hometown boy makes good.

B. When Jesus began to become distinguished as a teacher and rabbi and healer, the people of Nazareth dismissed him. They knew his roots, his family. They had watched him grow up. Was he gifted? Undoubtedly. But to those folks in his hometown, there was no way Jesus was the Messiah.

C. Nazareth is built on the brow of a hill. I have stood on that hill and looked down upon the city which is now the largest in the northern district of Israel. This is the hill where his hometown crowd was going to kill Jesus for blasphemy. “But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way” (Luke 4:30). The people of Nazareth tried to kill their hometown prodigy, Jesus, for the very crime for which the Jewish leaders would eventually have him executed—blasphemy. Jesus identified himself with the Messiah in the passage from Isaiah 61. He came to proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:19), and they almost killed him.

D. Nazareth deprived itself of the miraculous work of Jesus. He could not do any miracles there, except to lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them,” Mark records. “And he was amazed at their lack of faith (Mark 6:5-6).

E. *“Isn’t this the carpenter?” they asked. “Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him* (Mark 6:3).

**CONCLUSION**: **Many of you were born and grew up in Nazareth**. Jesus was an everyday discussion for you. You grew up reading about him, hearing about him, and taking him for granted, just as people in Nazareth did.

1. When you discovered that there were other belief systems and other religions, you were surprised and, maybe, confused.

2. Some of you have departed from Jesus simply because he is the familiar one, the hometown hero to you. And you have chosen a different path simply because it is different. Jesus has become despised because he is familiary.

3. If that has happened to you, I would suggest that you never really knew Jesus. You just knew about him. You heard about him. Everything you knew about Jesus was second hand. You never embraced him yourself. You are the one who grew up with him right there next to you, and never really believed.