

Service

Christmas Day 2007

Third Unitarian Church of Chicago

Homily:

“Can Anything Good Come From Nazareth?”

It’s time for a Bible lesson, and that’s my gift to you this morning! Any of you students of the Bible—is there anyone here who considers herself one of them?—you know that Jesus is supposed to have come from Nazareth. But did he? In the Gospels, Nazareth was the home of [Joseph](#) and [Mary](#), and where Mary was told by the [Angel Gabriel](#) that she would have [Jesus](#) as her son. Nazareth is also where Jesus grew up from some point in his childhood after returning to Israel from Egypt until his public ministry began at age 30 (Mt 1:18-2:23).

The line from the homily this morning comes from the Book of [John](#), where a skeptic asks, and “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Scholars debate what this means. Some suggest that it means Nazareth was small, unimportant.

But the question isn’t about Nazareth’s size, but of its *goodness*. In fact, Nazareth was viewed with hostility by the *all* the evangelists. All four of the gospels say that Nazareth did not believe in Jesus. Mark’s Gospel says that “[Jesus] could do no mighty work there.” All four have the line, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.” And in one passage in Luke, the Nazarenes even attempt to kill Jesus by throwing him off a cliff (Lk 4:29).

On top of this, we don't even know for certain that Jesus even was from Nazareth! First, there's no reference to Nazareth in the Hebrew Scriptures. And the French scholar Alfred Loisy said early in the last century that the Greek phrase, "*Iesous Nazarene*," meant not that Jesus was "from Nazareth", but rather that the title after his name was "[Nazarene](#)." If you're not up on your Jewish and Christian history, know that the Nazarenes were an early group of Jewish Christians.

To make the situation even *more* complicated, there's also proof in the Bible that Nazarene was a mistranslation of [Nazarite](#), a person who had taken a vow of holiness and was thus 'separated out' from the masses.

About a decade ago, an editor of [American Atheist Magazine](#) named Frank Zidler made these arguments and backed it up with some scholarship. This type of research—to disprove the validity of the Bible--continues to remind me of the line in a movie about aging ‘60’s radicals called “The Return of the Secaucus Seven,” where a woman said to a group of hip unbelievers discussing theology, “You atheists sure talk a lot about God!”

Despite the lack of certainty about Jesus’s identity, UU’s like us still celebrate the birth of Jesus. Like millions in the Christian communions, we’ve moved beyond the warm and cuddly feeling of the Nativity in getting a sense of who he was. We also don’t have to over-identify with the theme of his humble birth, as if in imagination we try to connect it with our life stories, and the modest circumstances of our own birth. We can instead focus on who he became, and less with where he’s supposed to be from.

I'm like Kurt Vonnegut, who died earlier this year, when he wrote, "I don't care who gave the Sermon on the Mount. I'm just glad it was said." A messianic type inspired a cult of devoted followers who were persecuted for centuries, just like their apparent founder. And one reason for this devotion unto death, and the growth of his movement, was for the words attributed to him, as in Luke.

The birth scene in Luke indicates that Jesus was to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: that a descendent from the house of David (that's why the nativity is in Bethlehem--to fulfill that prophecy) was to bring "good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the captives." That's an enduring challenge to those who have power, too much of it, and use it to keep it for themselves.

I have no need to constantly question the roots of Jesus's existence, or to continue to doubt the miracles attributed to him. That his testimony remains with us, and continues to bring hope to hopeless, despite the theological trappings and the arrogance of the established church; that what he said strikes a chord in hearts within and outside his movement who see injustice and who want to correct it, is enough for me.

I don't care who he really he was, and if it makes for a better story to know he's from Nazareth, then fine. It's good enough for me that the "good news to the oppressed," was said—and that some have taken it seriously, and brought more justice and peace to our world because of it.