

“Come and see.”

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” That was the question Nathanael asked Philip, when Philip told him that the Messiah was this Jesus of Nazareth. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

And it’s really such an interesting question, because it seems to me that when you start talking in those sorts of generalities — “Can *anything* good come out of Nazareth?” — then Nazareth has ceased to be an actual place where, certainly, bad things happen, but where also good things happen. And instead, Nazareth has been elevated to a sort of metaphor for any place where, or when, life is never good, where life is never pleasant, and where life is never fair.

And what happens when you start talking in terms of places being like Nazareth, is that you also then start talking about places that aren’t like Nazareth; places where life is always pleasant, where life is always fair, and where life is always easy.

And when you’ve set up this duality, where some places or situations are like Nazareth, and other places or situations are not like Nazareth, then life gets reduced to a striving to get away from those Nazareths we encounter, and go towards those places which aren’t Nazareth.

But here’s the thing: Looking at life like this is fundamentally wrong.

It was about 25 or 30 years ago when I read the book *The Road Less Traveled* by Scott Peck. It was an amazing book, and it began with these three words: “Life is difficult.” That was one of the basic tenets of that book, life is difficult. And in the first part of that book, Peck talks about how, when people refuse to accept the fact that life is difficult, they have a really hard time coping with the tough times that are simply normal to life.

Reading that book really changed the way I looked at life, and it changed the way I approached my ministry, and it enabled me to plot a significantly different course on my spiritual journey when life became hard. Let me give you some examples.

Twenty years ago, I was trying to support a family of four on the salary of a young assistant rector. Let me tell you, those were some tough financial times, when we lived from paycheck to paycheck; always hopeful, but never actually knowing how things would work out. Life had become, for me, like that metaphorical Nazareth. But somehow — and looking back I think it was clearly the grace of God — things did work out and we were alright.

And then a few years later, and over the course of a year or two, it seemed like Emily, our youngest daughter, was being diagnosed with one serious medical condition after another. That was a really hard time, and it was a really scary time. At one point in time, as I recall, there were three definite diagnosis, and she was being tested for a fourth. And we had no idea if or when the next shoe would drop. And when we were in the midst of all that, it was hard to be hopeful; it was hard to see how things might get resolved; life had become like that proverbial Nazareth. But looking back on that time, it's clear to me that it was the grace of God that things worked out really, really well, and Em is alright.

Several years after that, life became difficult again when I decided it was time to take my ministry to a new venue. I had spent 15 years in one place, and I really felt like I had done all I could do. And for two or three years I was reaching out to various churches, I was traveling for interviews, and time and time again it was “close but no cigar.” And there were times when it was so bad that I almost despaired, and wondered if there was any other church that would hire me. And for the longest time I didn't know how that situation would be resolved — life had become like that metaphorical Nazareth — but, looking back, I can see now that it was the grace of God that brought Peggy and me to Stillwater.

And if you were to ask me today — today! — if my life is difficult, I'd tell you that, yes, it is. And that it started about two weeks ago on a Friday, when I received an unexpected diagnosis of prostate cancer. That was a pretty hard day, and I had a tough time trying to imagine how things would play out. My life was definitely like Nathanael's idea of Nazareth.

The following Monday I had a couple of scans — a bone scan, and some CT scans — that seemed to indicate that the cancer was localized, that it hadn't spread. So then, Peggy and I spent about a week looking at all our options, considering all of the risks, and the decision we came to was that surgery was the route to follow.

And so, this coming Wednesday morning, I'm going to have surgery to remove my prostate.

So, right now, for me, life is difficult. And though I'm hopeful, there are still a lot of unanswered questions; there's still a lot of uncertainty.

And there are times when I dwell on that uncertainty; there are times when it would be so easy to feel like that proverbial person who, though they may be in a room full of people, nevertheless they feel as though they are absolutely alone.

It would be easy to feel that way, except for one thing: the experiences I've had on my spiritual journey — a few of which I've just shared with you — those experiences have taught me something very important, and it's this: that, even if I happen to be the only living soul in some particular room or building, I'm never really alone.

Oh, yes, there have been many times when something has happened, and I've wondered "Where is God in all this?" And almost invariably, sometime later, I've looked back and, in retrospect, I could see clearly where God was at work.

Maybe, if my faith has taught me anything, it's how to be patient. And how to hope.

And so now, I find once more that life has become difficult for me; it seems to have become once more like that metaphorical Nazareth.

And over the past couple of weeks, whenever I've found myself in that place where I've wondered if anything good can come from this Nazareth, you know, I believe I can almost hear God whispering in my ear, "Come and see."