

Can anything good come out of ...?
#3 in a sermon series on Life's Unanswered Questions
John 1: 43-46
Sunday, February 19, 2012
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For the past 6 years I have been serving on the Institutional Review Board of South Shore Hospital as part of my community involvement as a minister. The IRB is a group of doctors, nurses, hospital administrators, and lay/community people, who get together every other month to discuss and vote on proposals for clinical trials at the hospital.

A week before the meeting, I get this three-inch folder delivered to my house which I have to read in preparation of the meeting. It is packed with information, and to be honest, 95% of what I read I do not understand because it's medical language. The meeting itself is not that much better. The medical staff speaks English, but often the content goes right over my head. So, you might ask, "What is the point of having lay people be part of this group?" We usually read the consent form that the patient will have to sign to become part of the study. The consent form is to be written on a level that an 8th grader can understand it. That I can handle!

Most consent forms are standardized which means they don't change that much from one clinical trial to the next. But there is one paragraph in every consent form that gets me every time. It says: "There might be no direct benefit to you in participating in this study. It might benefit others later on depending on the results – or something like that." Depending on the trial the 'irrational me' asks, "Why would someone participate in a medical trial that most likely will not benefit the person?" But then the 'rational me' returns and knows that the only way to find out more about and even cure a disease is through trial and error.

It is a challenging and interesting task serving on this board, and the reason I stick with it even though most of the time I have no clue what the medical professionals are talking about is that I get to ask, "Can anything good come out of it?"

That is the question for today's sermon. I am continuing our sermon series on the difficult questions, and among the questions given to us was: Are tragedies random or purposeful? This question can be asked in many different ways, like "Can tragedies serve a purpose?", or "Can anything good come from it or out of...?" - whatever it is.

Nathanael asked that question when Philip told him that they had found the One that Moses foretold, and the prophets hoped for. We need to remember that the Israelites were hoping for a Messiah, a savior who would free them from their

enemies which at the time were the Romans. And in a few people's eyes, Jesus, the son of Joseph, from Nazareth, came to fit that bill. Nathanael's response to that news could not have been less enthusiastic: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

We don't know exactly why Nazareth got slammed by Nathanael. But his remark led generation after generation assume that Nazareth was famous for being infamous; that Nazareth was the worst city anyone could possibly come from, a nest of rebels and no goods. It would make the comment much more interesting.

Actually, from what we know, Nazareth was a dinky, dusty, insignificant village of stone homes struggling to stay solvent. Nazareth was unremarkable, undistinguished, unconsidered. It wasn't remarkable for being unremarkable. It was a place where people lived their lives; a quiet place, the place Joseph chose to raise his family. Nothing more, and nothing less.

What might 'Nazareth' stand for? I think that for Nathanael it stood for trouble; trouble in the person of this Jesus. He came onto the scene with the reputation of a rebel. As soon as he started his ministry, he decided to mess with the established religious sensibilities and customs of his day, which of course angered the religious leaders. He ate with sinner, spoke directly to women, he equated one's neighbor with those who were looked down on, he broke the Sabbath by performing healings, he welcomed children into their midst, and everybody else who found themselves at the absolute bottom of the social totem pole. And to top this religious rebellion off, he claimed an allegiance higher than an allegiance to Caesar, and proclaimed a peace more powerful and important than making peace with Rome. Nathanael asked a good question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

What might Nazareth stand for us today? It might stand for how we relate to Jesus. Can anything good come from following this rebel in the 21st century? What difference might he make in our lives? which is an interesting question but not the one I am going to follow up on.

Another way of thinking about Nazareth is that it might stand for all the trials and tribulations of life each of us goes through. It might stand for the insight that maybe my life isn't going where I think it should be going, or that I am stuck in a situation I can do nothing about or are too scared to do something about. It might stand for the realization that no matter how smart I am or what school I go to and the degrees I have in my pocket or how much money I make, I will never fit in, never become an insider.

Maybe Nazareth stands for all the stuff that is going on in our lives and in the world that is not going according to plan. In that sense, Nathanael's question can be paraphrased for us today:

Can anything good come out of my depleted pension?
Can anything good come out of my pink slip?
Can anything good come out of my spouse's illness or death?
Can anything good come out of my child's addiction?
Can anything good come out of the mess in the Middle East?

I am sure that we all bring our own questions to the table. What is our answer?

We might say, "It depends – on the circumstances, on faith, on timing, or whatever we want to make our answer depend on.

Maybe our answer is a strong "no" and no argument will persuade otherwise.

Or if we are willing to open ourselves up to the possibility of answering that question with a 'yes' or even a 'maybe,' then there is good news. A 'yes' might open us to the possibility of God's presence pouring in which helps us to turn a seemingly hopeless situation into one of hope, and grace, and most of all, of purpose. It does not happen right away, but it happens, again and again, all around us. Let me give you a few examples:

Alex's Lemonade Stand - was created to help kids with cancer and was created by Alex Scott who opened her first lemonade stand at age 4. Although she knew she had terminal cancer she did it to help raise money to find a cure for other kids. Alex died of her cancer in 2004 but her dream lives on.

America's Most Wanted - is hosted by John Walsh whose son was abducted and murdered. John turned his passion of standing up for victims into the nation's number one crime fighting show that so far has captured 846 criminals.

Beyond the 11th - is a non-profit organization that provides support to widows in Afghanistan who have been afflicted by war, terrorism and oppression. This organization was founded by Needhamite Susan Retik and Patti Quigly in 2003, whose husbands were killed on September 11th. They have turned their heartbreak into a powerful mission to help Afghan widows to overcome the never-ending cycle of extreme poverty and helplessness by helping them gain skills necessary to generate their own income and become self-sufficient.

We like to believe that we live in a world that is kind and good, where wealth, health, and joy reign supremely. The truth is far from it. We all will have to deal with our communal and personal "Nazareths" in our lifetime. There is no answer out there that explains the "Why" and there is nothing we can do about the "When". But we have the power to decide how we are going to deal with it. We have the power to answer the question, "Can anything good come out of it?" with an angry 'no' or, or a non-committal 'depends', or an affirmative 'yes.'

In my work on this sermon I came across a wonderful book by Rabbi David Wolpe called, "Making Loss Matter, Creating Meaning in Difficult Times."

We all should read this book because we all will struggle with the trials and tribulations of life – with loss, and pain, and heartache. He writes at the end of chapter one, "My deepest prayer to God used to be to spare me from the pains of life that I so dreaded. Now I see that that is the prayer of a child. As a man I do not pray for a life without pain. Instead I pray: 'Dear God, I know that there will be pain in my life, and sadness, and loss. Please give me the strength to create a life, together with those whom I live, where loss will not be empty, where pain will not be purposeless. Help me find the faith to make loss matter. '" (page 22).

The creation of meaning in the face of our "Nazareths" might come in lemonade stands, foundations that help others, or by making a commitment to simply be a presence to those suffering.

But meaning hopefully also comes by drawing on our faith, by realizing that God is not the cause of everything that happens in our lives (believe it or not, lots of people think of God like that, you know, the grand puppet master!), but God is the spiritual power that remains with us to nurture and guide us through whatever tragedy or triumph we may encounter. It is the power of divine love that reminds us that we are not alone and that we will never be abandoned. It is this spiritual power, the power of God's love that helps to carry us through the twists and turns of life's journey.

Amen.