Sermon 4 - “Called to Be Nazarenes”
Isaiah 11:1-9 Matthew 2:13-23

Just after Christmas, a harried young mother was beside herself, when the phone rang and she heard with relief a kindly female voice, “Hi, sweetheart. How are you?” “Oh, mother,” she said, breaking into tears. “It’s been an awful day. Hubby had to go back to work. The baby won’t eat. The dishwasher broke. I tripped on the steps and sprained my ankle. I haven’t had a chance to go shopping. And to top it all off, the inlaws are coming over for supper.” “There, there, darling. Everything will be alright,” the soothing voice said. “Sit down, relax, close your eyes, and ice the ankle. I’ll be over in 30 minutes. I’ll pick something up on the way, cook dinner for you, clean the house, and feed the baby. I’ll also call a repair man to fix the dishwasher. Now stop crying. I’ll take care of everything. In fact, I’ll call George at the office and tell him to come home early.” “George?” said the distraught housewife. “Who’s George?” “Why George, you know. George your husband.” “But my husband’s name is Frank.” A brief pause ensued. The voice hesitantly asked, “Excuse me, is this 555-1758?” A tearful reply said, “No, this is 555-1788.” “Oh my, what a dreadful mistake, apologized the embarrassed voice on the phone. I’m terribly sorry. I must have dialed the wrong number.” Another brief pause came, before the would-be daughter asked, “Does this mean you are not coming over?”

It is in such a world that we all live, a world of stress, a world with mistakes, a world where we often feel like victims, a world where there are everyday calamities, a world of natural disasters, sickness, accidents, crime, and strangers who do us in. Even family members disappoint and warp us. Yet we know it is important to keep the larger picture before us, the picture of life as a mysterious interplay of both good and bad.

Way back in the first chapter of Genesis, we are presented with a world created by God, a world of blessing and goodness, a world where we are

made in God's image, with minds and hearts yearning for love, a world where we are to name the animals and care for the earth, a world where we are to be companions and helpmates to one another. But the very next chapter of Genesis presents us with a world where there are also tricky serpents, a world where there are baffling choices, a world of pain, curses, lost gardens, and growing weeds. Life is like that with its mysterious mixture of blessing and curse, light and darkness, good and evil.

When we follow Jesus' footsteps through early childhood, we discover not just the blessing of Bethlehem, but also the exile of Egypt. Singing angels, worshiping shepherds (if we follow Luke's portrayal), and wisemen (if we follow Matthew's portrayal), gave way to a murderous king, a fearful fleeing, and chosen exile. When King Herod later died, three of his sons took over ruling his divided kingdom, and the most benevolent son oversaw the part of the kingdom known as Galilee. The safer rule of this king prompted Joseph to resettle the family there from Egypt, according to Matthew's writer. Whereas Bethlehem was close to the big city of Jerusalem, Galilee was in the country and far from big cities.

The writer of Matthew sees deep meaning in this return of the family from Egypt, a fulfillment of the OT prophet Hosea's words, "The Lord says, when Israel was a child, I loved him and called him out of Egypt as my son. I took him in my arms, drew him to me with affection and love, picked him up and held him to my cheek." (11:1, 3-4) Just as the great Jewish leader Moses led the first Jews out of Egyptian slavery, through the wilderness, to the promised land, so Jesus is now the new Moses, who, having escaped infant killing like Moses did in the bulrushes, will now lead his people to a new promised land. So Joseph and Mary take Jesus to Nazareth, prompting Matthew to see prophecy fulfilled in the act, "He will be called a Nazarene." The only problem is we don't know which prophecy is fulfilled, for there's no direct reference in the prophets to "Nazarene." Perhaps the writer of Matthew is suggesting Jesus will be an

especially dedicated person from birth on, like the Nazarites of the OT.

More probably Matthew is calling to mind the words of Isaiah 11:1, “The royal line of David is like a tree that has been cut down; but just as new branches sprout from a stump, so a new king will rise among David’s descendants.” In the Hebrew language, the world for a “branch” or “shoot” sprouting forth is “netzer.” Hebrew was written only with consonants and no vowels, so most probably the writer of Matthew took the consonants to refer to ‘Nazareth” or “Nazarene.” “Netzer” or “branch” or “shoot” is a powerful image. I have seen shoots growing out of tree stumps, even with springtime buds bursting forth on the shoots. This brings to mind the image of Isaiah depicting Israel as a shoot, and the image of Jesus as a Nazarene shoot growing out of the world’s stumps.

A man in Maine deals with dead leaves in a unique way. Unlike some who just let them lie as protection or fertilizer, or some who rake them with as little time and effort as possible, or some who blow them with loud irritating devices, he rakes them into piles and even dries them in the sun or under a canopy. He does all this to make a big heap, so his dog Stella can jump in, which she does with nothing or only a little of her body showing. Often it is only a wagging tail. (video clip)

What an image for the coming year. In a world where a lot of things seem like decaying leaves, we need to envision a tail wagging out to the world in hope and joy. We need to jump into the dead leaf pile and relinquish the feeling that we are dead stumps, callinfg to mind a girl named Abby who got pulled over by an Alabama state trooper for speeding. "I can't afford a ticket. I'm in a dead end job," she pleaded. For some gracious reason, the trooper pointed out a shoot from the felt stump of her life. He talked with her about a career, and listened to her longings. They both decided she would make a good nurse. He took the ticket and wrote on it. "Promise you'll go to scrub or nursing school, slow down, and I won't give you a ticket." He didn't really expect her to follow

the advice, but she did. She became a surgical tech at the University of Alabama at Birmingham hospital, even invited him to her graduation, and led him to say, "It made my whole career worthwhile."

We need to relinquish the feeling that we are dead stumps, like the Norwegian man named Mats Steen, who had a genetic muscle-wasting disease that reared its ugly head to his parents when he was age two. He ended up in a wheelchair, losing movement day by day, though he still graduated from high school with excellent grades, and shared in a communal passion for video games. He especially liked a role-playing game called *World of Warcraft*, in which thousands of players explore a vast, three dimensional fantasy world, working together to complete quests and defeat monsters. Denied many pleasures in life, his parents allowed him to spend hours and hours playing. But when he died of a respiratory illness at age 26, his parents grieved deeply over the loss of a child who supposedly had never made a mark outside his own immediate family, never known romantic love or lasting friendship, never made a meaningful contribution to society. Devastated, the parents logged into his blog to let those who knew him of his death.

But then, something surprising happened. A branch appeared, a "netzer," perhaps as people of faith, we might say the "Nazarene." Condolences began to come in from all over the world. You see, Mats had created a virtual character within *World of Warcraft*, a charismatic adventurer named Ibelin, a strapping swashbuckler, with auburn hair tied in a pony tail and a butch goatee beard. A primary school teacher in Denmark broke down in her class and went home when she heard of his death. A stranger reported, "He was a real friend to me." Another said, "He was an incurable romantic and had considerable success with women." Another reported, I don't think he was aware of how big an impact he had on a lot of people." As a member of the game's guild, a prolific poster, he had swapped thousands of messages with people around the world.

At age 17, he had even befriended a teenage girl from the Netherlands, romantically falling for her in such a way that she gave him a virtual kiss in their virtual characters. Of course Matt wouldn't meet her or even video-chat, though they shared mix CD's and sketches of their virtual characters embracing. When she went through a severe depression from her parents taking away the computer because of dropping grades, he wrote a heartfelt but measured letter to the parents, and helped her get out of of the depression and her computer back. He befriended the mother of an autistic teenager, suggesting she invite her son into the virtual game itself, which ended up in a virtual hug between mother and son, leading the woman to say, "It was the first in my life that I could feel love, and started to understand love. The heavens opened up. This was what I was waiting for." The branch that grew out of Mats existence is now documented on a *Netflix* film, *The Remarkable Life of Ibelin.*

Most of us experience life's Bethlehem's, blessings, angels singing, joyous shepherds, and worshiping wisemen. But sooner or later we will also feel like trees cut down, almost dead. We will feel like Rachel weeping, or that faithful Rachel's should be weeping for us. We may find ourselves fleeing to Egypt in fear of the world's King Herod's. Blessing gives way to curse. Egypt is the place of exile, hurt and loss from physical and sexual abuse, accidents, sickness, broken relationships, disappearing jobs, conflict, lack of meaning, depression, life-shaking transitions, even death. But God calls us to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, following him out of Egypt, letting the shoot of the Nazarene spring forth amid the stumps of our lives.

Some years ago, the Catholic church explored the possibility of declaring a woman named Dorothy Day a saint. She was an unlikely candidate as a Greenwich, NY radical of the 1920's. Though baptized an Episcopalian, she had little exposure to religion. In college she rejected Christianity, dropped out of school, worked as a journalist in NY for a

variety of radical newspapers, taking part in protests. Some called her a communist because she befriended socialists, anarchists, and an assortment of NY artists and intellectuals who saw religion as an opiate of the people. The FBI investigated her because she was a free spirit who didn't obey others easily. By age 30, she was divorced, pregnant with another lover's child, filled with some happiness from the pregnancy and motherhood, aimless in life, all of which helped lead her to a mysterious conversion. She chose obedience to the Nazarene out of her long loneliness, having her child baptized in the Catholic church, and then herself baptized a little later. The man she loved left her because he would have nothing to do with marriage or her religion.

Dorothy was not content just to offer band aid help to the poor. She challenged the political structures of justice, embraced nonviolence during World War II and the following Cold War. She built a string of hospitality houses for the homeless and the hungry, championing the rights of immigrants and farm laborers. Embracing poverty herself, she advised friends not to trivialize her by trying to make her a saint. She once wrote, "Whatever I had read as a child about saints thrilled me. I could see the nobility of giving ones life for the sick, the maimed, the lepers . . . But there was another question in my mind. Why was so much done in remedying the evil, instead of avoiding it in the first place? Where were the saints to try to change the social order? Not just to minister to the slaves, but to do away with slavery?"

Dorothy Day was a lady who found chosen obedience to the Nazarene, and the stump of her life became a shoot bursting forth with the spirit of Jesus. Like the writer of Matthew, she heralded the shoot of the Nazarene, summed up in the words of a poet.

“One song can spark a moment, one flower can wake a dream,
One tree can start a forest, one bird can herald spring.
One smile begins a friendship, one handclasp lifts a soul,
One star can guide a ship at sea, one word can frame a goal.
One vote can change a nation, one sunbeam lights a room,
One candle wipes out darkness, one laugh will conquer gloom.
One step must start a journey,
One word must start a prayer,
One hope can raise our spirits,
One touch can show you care.
One voice can speak with wisdom,
One heart can know what’s true,
One life can make a difference,
The Nazarene, he lived and served for you.”