

THE NAZARENE
October 26, 2014 –Matthew 26: 63-75 –Reformation Sunday
The Church of the Covenant

“The Nazarene” was an epithet directed at Jesus during his life by his enemies. According to His critics, Nazareth was a religious backwater in Israel where surely no prophet, let alone the Son of God, would hail from. As is recorded in scripture people would say of Him –“*Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?*” (John 1: 46). The gospel of Matthew prophesies that the Son of God would be called a Nazarene –“*He shall be called a Nazarene.*” (Matthew 2: 23) The gospel writer says He will be called something that is not complementary. Yet it is, as the Book of Acts notes, in the name of Jesus Christ OF NAZARETH, that healing and wholeness comes, “*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*” (Acts 4: 12) Note how God has taken an epithet thrown by critics and turned it into the name by which the world must be saved. Jesus Christ IS “THE NAZARENE”.

Narratives are singular in their power to determine reality. The stories we tell have a power beyond themselves. They are believed and repeated; sometimes they create reality and sometimes they obscure reality. There is a powerful American Narrative current in our culture today. I believe it to be this –ALL PEOPLE ARE ESSENTIALLY GOOD, ALL PEOPLE ARE ESSENTIALLY REASONABLE AND RATIONAL, ALL RELIGIOUS PEOPLE ESSENTIALLY WORSHIP THE SAME GOD, ALL PEOPLE ARE ESSENTIALLY THE SAME. And we want to believe this. We want the world to be this way. We project our own values and desires and hopes and dreams, our beliefs and heart held hopes on other people. We want to assume the world is a reasonable and rational place filled with basically good people. And then something comes along like ISIS (The Islamic State in Syria) or ISIL (the Islamic State in the Levant), the Islamic State, the religious impulse to reestablish the Islamic Caliphate and reestablish a world power linked to Islam arises and it destroys this nice narrative of the way we want the world to be. Islamic religious terrorism raises its ugly head. Whole communities are butchered, some just because they do not subscribe to the particular brand of Islam promoted by ISIS. But Jews and Christians are particularly singled out. Christians are beheaded. Christians are nailed to crosses. When ISIS invades a town the threat is made –convert, or pay ransom, or die. And the terrorists dressed in black go from house to house and paint a large “N” on the door of Christians –the “N” stands for Nazarene – as in, these are the followers of Jesus. According to the Quran, the Moslem holy book, when someone is marked as an infidel, then a good Moslem has the right, indeed the duty, to harass and persecute and ultimately to kill anyone who resides in a house marked with an “N” –marked with the sign of Jesus of Nazareth.

The nice American narrative of how we had hoped the world would be has become shattered by the rise of what can only be described as pure evil. Not essentially good people, not people who are reasonable and rational, not people whose religious impulse draws them to unity with other faiths. No, this is the same evil that in the 1930’s painted Jewish Stars of David on Jewish homes in Nazi Germany, a prelude of the horrific evil that was to come. The world has become a very different place and very rapidly; if the reality of the 20th century was the rise of totalitarianism then the reality of the 21st century will be the rise of a totalitarian terroristic Islamic State that targets the infidel. That will draw Jewish stars on Jewish homes and paint “N”s on Christian ones. The old narrative isn’t true anymore and, by the way, this time, we Christians are now in the crosshairs...

Now I am glad I am not a politician and I am glad I am not a military strategist so I can allow others, much wiser than am I, to discuss and debate these matters. But I am a pastor and my expertise is in spiritual matters. So what I must say to you is this –the best thing we can do is to assure that there is a

resurgent, vital, resilient spiritually alive and spiritually powerful Christianity alive in the world at this moment in our history. As Christians, ultimately, we believe good overcomes evil. We believe love conquers the world through Jesus Christ. Those that live by the sword shall die by the sword, but those who live in the spiritual power of Jesus of Nazareth shall live by the sword of the Spirit. Jesus conquers the world by conquering the human heart. Jesus shall reign when humankind opens its heart to Him. The Prince of Peace shall rule when He rules within our heart. The world is conquered one person at a time when people take seriously the holy power of a Living Savior to transform, first our lives, and then, the world itself. So many people keep asking me, "O Stu, why do you keep talking about and praying for and hoping for spiritual renewal, even revival, to break out in the American church?" Because this is the one thing that is an antidote for a world poised on the brink of insanity. Everyone is a good person. No they aren't and that's why we need Jesus. Everyone is reasonable and rational. No they aren't and that's why we need Jesus. Everyone worships the same God. No they don't and that's why I worship the God who was revealed in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Love and Prince of Peace. A bland secularism devoid of moral and spiritual power will not have the resources necessary to oppose evil in our world. But a church filled with the living presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, will.

It is hard for us as American Christians to even consider what it might feel like to be persecuted for our faith. That's not part of our narrative. But, of course, we began with John Knox in Scotland as a church born of a religious reawakening, called the Protestant Reformation, which we celebrate today. Sometimes we forget, say, that John Knox became a slave in a galley ship, staining with an oar to which he was chained, and suffering and being persecuted for his faith. Our nice, safe comfortable church came from people who suffered, and sometimes paid the ultimate price, for their faith.

So I want us to consider now the story of the Apostle Peter we just read, only I want us to apply it to ourselves in the new world in which we live. I want us to consider that a large "N" has been painted on the door of our own house. It is personally dangerous to be associated with this Jesus of Nazareth, that His followers are being rounded up and being brought before rump courts, even to lose their lives for what they believe. This is the scene I am painting for you today. So you are waiting in the courtyard outside a courtroom. Jesus is on trial (by the way, Jesus is ALWAYS on trial in a way). He is accused of many things; His followers are accused of many things. Our faith is on the line. Our life is on the line. Where we will spend eternity is on the line. Some want to paint a large "N" on us. But there is another mark we bear. Just as the Jewish people would wear their phylacteries, the sign of the law literally upon their foreheads, or their mezuzas on their doorpost, the sign of God's law that they touched every time they entered their home, we wear the mark of the Nazarene on us. Jesus is the image of the invisible God and we bear the mark of the Savior in our heart. So someone comes up to you and says, as was said to Peter, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." (Matthew 26: 69) Do we say what Peter said or do we confess this Jesus as Lord? Another person comes up and says, "*This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.*" (v. 71) There is the epithet "NAZARENE" still being thrown at the Savior. What would you say? What would you do? Peter said, "*I do not know the man.*" (v. 74) But what would you say, if you knew that the very next thing might be your own crucifixion? I would hope I would be strong enough to identify myself with "The Nazarene". For HE has identified Himself with me. Beloved, this is a time to identify yourself with the light of the world, the Prince of Peace, the One name under heaven by which we must be saved...

Can any good come out of Nazareth? Yeah. Only the hope for the world –THE NAZARENE. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*