

## Nazareth

- Feast of the Holy Family
- December 27, 2020
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Today is the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. After angels, dreams, shepherds, the whole heavenly host, prophets and stars, the child in a manger, or held in the arms of Simeon and Anna in the temple in Jerusalem, it is time to return to ordinary family life. As our gospel says, Mary, Joseph, and the child “returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.”

On this Feast of the Holy Family, I’d like us to think of our own hometowns. The hometown of Jesus was Nazareth. In 1964, in the midst of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI went to Nazareth, the first pope to do so for millennia. In a famous sermon there on January 5<sup>th</sup> of that year he said,

“Nazareth is a kind of school where we may begin to discover what Christ’s life was like and even to understand his Gospel. Here we can observe and ponder the simple appeal of the way God’s son came to be known, profound yet full of hidden meaning... Here we can learn to realize who Christ really is. And here we can sense and take account of the conditions and circumstances that surrounded and affected his life on earth: the places, the tenor of the times, the culture, the language, religious customs; in brief, everything which Jesus used to make himself known to the world. Here everything speaks to us, everything has meaning.”

Nazareth, Jesus’s hometown, shaped him. It was in Nazareth that in his family he grew and learned and prayed and played and watched all around him, where he picked up from Mary and Joseph and from the local synagogue his knowledge of and love for the Hebrew Scriptures through which he understood who he was. Nazareth was his hometown, the source of what he drew from in manifesting himself. He left Nazareth; but he never left Nazareth behind for it was the source of who he showed himself to be.

We, too, have a hometown. For most of us probably not Seattle, and even if Seattle, not the Seattle of today. Our hometown where we grew up in our families—regardless of where those hometowns were or what those families were like—they shaped us. They are the source of who we are. God’s grace worked in us in our childhoods in an immediate, impressionable, unveiled way in our hometowns, our Nazareths where we, like Jesus, as the gospel says, “grew and became strong... and the favor of God was upon” us. They say, “you can never go home”; but it is just as true to say “you can leave home, but home will never leave you”. It is an unequalled and unrepeatable source of who we truly are and of God’s grace in our lives.

Pope Paul the Sixth was not one to make exclamations of deep feeling and joy! But in this sermon in the town of Nazareth he exclaims, “How I would like to return to my childhood and attend the simple yet profound school that is Nazareth!” But he says he is “on a pilgrimage” and

“time presses on” and “I must set aside my desire to stay and carry on my education in the Gospel, for that education is never finished.”

Let us this day of the Holy Family stay for just awhile with Jesus in Nazareth and stay with our own childhood in our own Nazareth before we carry on our own education in the Gospel throughout the coming church year.

In his Nazareth as a child Jesus saw leaven making dough rise, his mother threading a needle, she sweeping the house to find a lost coin. He saw grain poured into the lap of a worker as a daily wage, the buds of green leaves on trees as the first sign of spring, a house built on rock and another sagging on sand. He joined children playing their games in the village square and calling to one another and he, like those children, was embraced by his parents when he came back to them from play. The boy Jesus around the edges of his hometown thrilled to the sparrows, the lilies of the fields, the small fields of wheat, the shepherds with their flocks and their sheepfolds. He felt sorrow for a bereft neighboring widow when her only son died; his heart grew in compassion with the lame, deaf, mute, the troubled of his village of Nazareth. The boy Jesus knew well the local simple synagogue in the home of the rabbi, heard the Hebrew scriptures there, read them, intoned them, memorized them, applied them to his life, his self-understanding, and his world. Jesus was, as a child, a part of the poverty and the oppression of his people in their land occupied by the Romans. All of this was Nazareth for him. Indeed, as Pope Paul VI said he manifested himself and his Gospel from what he experienced, what he learned, and how he was shaped for life by Nazareth. Every chapter of the Gospels makes clear that Nazareth never left him, that Nazareth remained the source from which he drew his message, that Nazareth was an unequalled and unrepeated source of grace and life for him.

So too for us the Nazareths of our lives. They have shaped how we feel, and think, and relate, and love, and imagine, and speak and act, and believe, and are. Even if traumas marked our early lives these traumas were lined with a capacity to develop special strengths as adults because of them. We were undefended against life in our childhoods—whatever they were like—and God’s presence and grace was unobstructed in working within us, whether in our joys or our sufferings, or in our ordinary lives. In our childhood experience God’s grace slipped into our hearts unbeknownst, and that grace is still within our hearts as a treasure to be opened to nurture our adult lives of faith. We were told at some point, or perhaps we told ourselves, “to get on with life” and so we did, to make a life, to create a life, but the very source of our lives in our childhood still abides in us, still shapes who we really are, still informs the feel of our faith. I cannot tell you how God’s grace worked in you in your Nazareth, but I can tell you that God’s grace did work in you and is still to be drawn on by you as from the deep well of your being. I ask you, what is there for you in that source of life and faith that you might do well to draw on in this Christmas season, and on this Holy Family Sunday, returning to your own town as the gospel says Mary and Joseph and the child “returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth” where “the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” as God’s favor is upon you.