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1 Kings 19:9–13 Revised Standard Version.

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Listening for the Still, Small Voice.

We're going to talk about Nazareth today. But first, I wanted to tell you about Danny, a good friend of mine in grammar school. He had five brothers and a sister. His father had recently died of lung cancer, and he was acting out at school. I don't remember what he did – maybe he had been talking in class - but the sister teaching our class got fed up with him and ordered him to go sit in the cloak room for ten minutes. Do you remember cloak rooms? Did you have them where you lived? We had them. It was where we hung our uniform sweaters. It was L.A. and we did not own coats and had no idea what a "cloak" was. But getting back to Danny: he obeyed, but he was deeply upset, and as he shuffled his feet into the cloak room, he looked over his shoulder, and

tearfully asked the sister why he had to go sit by himself. I'll get back to Danny and tell you what the sister said back to him.

When there is no war, Nazareth is an urban center, packed with tourists and with a modest Christian community. It is ancient, beautiful, with many old stone buildings. Right now, it is on the verge of economic collapse because of the war, but we presume that it will bounce back and once again be a global destination for Christians. But in the time of Jesus, Nazareth – where Jesus spent approximately thirty years – was extremely small. There were at most a few hundred residents, perhaps only one hundred. The ground was rocky, not fertile, like the surrounding Galilee area. Unlike prosperous people in neighboring towns, folks in Nazareth survived on subsistence farming. Nazareth is not mentioned in any surviving historical documents - other than the New Testament - from the early Roman Empire period. In other words, Jesus' hometown was off the map, as they say, but quite literally.

But Jesus did well, growing up in his tiny village. The Gospel of Luke tells us that *“Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man, and the grace of God was upon him”*. Interestingly, we don't know much at all about Jesus' childhood in Nazareth. Pretty much the only other thing we know is that Jesus, as a twelve-year-old, decided on his own to spend time in the Temple, when he was in Jerusalem with his family as they made a pilgrimage there for Passover. But here's an interesting issue: As is demonstrated in the passage that describes this in the second Chapter

of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was a strong believer even as a young boy, and he studied his Hebrew Scripture hard while he was growing up in the tiny town of Nazareth. When his parents made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for various holidays, which they did quite regularly, they traveled in a large group, presumably with other people from Nazareth. So, it seems that the people of Nazareth were devout believers, that they were very spiritual people who were dedicated to their faith and their God. Why would it be likely that Nazareth was an especially holy place?

Nazareth was in the southern part of a large area called the Galilee that surrounded the western coastline of the Sea of Galilee, which is in truth a large lake. Nazareth itself was far from both the Sea of Galilee and from the Mediterranean Sea to the west. But Nazareth was situated between the new emerging world of the Mediterranean and the ancient world of the Near East. Nearby in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, there was a highly developed world of commerce and rich agricultural land. The Galilee itself was in the center of the powerful Greco-Roman world, with many international traders passing through to buy and sell goods. The Galilee was governed by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. But Nazareth was high up on a ridge, and to be part of that advancing civilization, the people of Nazareth would have to take a long, difficult walk down a small mountainside. Moreover, the weak limestone of Nazareth was a poor building material. Archeologists tell us that perhaps there wasn't even a true synagogue. In sum, away from commerce, with very few jobs, away from the roads that

connected the ancient east and the growing west, and with perhaps no large structures, the people of Nazareth were quite poor. The nearest town that would have provided access to jobs and commerce was a two hour walk away. It was called Sephora.

Here is a passage from Chapter 2 of Matthew, and I have edited it for brevity:

After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother," the angel said. "Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

¹⁴ That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, ¹⁵ and they stayed there until Herod's death.

¹⁶ Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men's report of the star's first appearance. ¹⁷

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." ²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. ²³ And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

As an aside, Bible translations tend to describe Joseph and Jesus as being carpenters. In Matthew, we read this: ⁵⁵ *Is not this the carpenter's son?* The truth is that the word that is translated "carpenter" is actually the Greek word "tektone" – and it does not mean carpenter. It is a more general word that is sometimes translated as "builder", but really means "skilled worker in building materials". In Jesus' time, this would be primarily stone and metal, and only very secondarily wood, as there was not a lot of wood to build with in the desert. There would have been building going on in

nearby Sephora, and this was probably the only place where Joseph could find truly professional work. Remember that there was only very poor stone – the primary building material – and virtually no construction going on in Nazareth. While he was probably the building expert for his small village of Nazareth, Joseph might not have worked in Nazareth very much.

Back to Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus. Why do we believe that Nazareth was a place of deep faith, given its remoteness and poverty? Nazareth was settled in the second or first century B.C., and just before this, Jews had gotten back control of the land around Nazareth. As a result, Jews went to this area and probably initially established Nazareth as a way of actively reclaiming this area that had been taken over by pagans. The Jews who went to Nazareth were most likely dedicated followers of God who were determined to make the area the home of God again. So, there was Jesus, spending his life in an itchy-bitsy, spiritually devout village, high up on a ridge, looking down at the bustling, commercial Roman world of the Galilee. He could see the empire from which Christianity would emerge. His parables are filled with descriptions of the place and its people. That vantage point, the holy town of Nazareth, was where Jesus developed his faith, his purpose, and his determination to change the world.

Quite powerfully, it was also an ancient prophesy that the Messiah would indeed be the product of that holy city of Nazareth. This is from Chapter 11 of Isaiah: *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*

Isaiah was major prophet, who before he became a prophet, was a Temple priest. We call him a major prophet because his book is so long, but he was arguably the most important prophet for the ancient Jews, and he certainly was the most influential prophet for Christianity as a whole. Isaiah lived in Judah, a part of Israel that was under the domination of the pagan Assyrian empire. Isaiah tells his people that they are not right in their relationship with God, and that they must change their ways if they want to regain control of their land. Isaiah promises, though, that better days are ahead for the people of Judah, that joy will come in the form of a child that would break the domination of their oppressors. The brief passage I just read comes from Chapter 11; this Chapter is devoted to the theme of how Israel will be restored as an independent nation of God. This passage says that the promised Messiah will be a shoot that will grow out of Jesse. It happens to be that Jesse was the father of King David. This means that the Messiah will be in the family line of David – as, indeed, Jesus was, through both his mother Mary and through Joseph.

Here's something intriguing: the Hebrew word for branch is "*netzer*" and it sounds very much like Nazareth, and so the word Nazareth probably derives directly from this word "*netzer*", or branch. It seems that Matthew is referring to this passage from Isaiah in our passage from Matthew: *And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.* The context of this passage from the Gospel of Matthew is this: Herod Senior wants to kill

Jesus. And so, he intends to annihilate the newborn king, Jesus, through wholesale carnage. He's going to wipe out all children who could possibly be the Messiah. But an angel appears to Joseph, warning him to take his family and flee. They go to Egypt. Herod dies, Herod Jr. takes over, and eventually Joseph and family go to Nazareth. Also, remember that Matthew, as we have discussed in the past, wrote largely for Jewish converts to Christianity, and so he was determined to show that Jesus came to fulfill Old Testament prophecies. So, Matthew is saying in our quote that Jesus came as the Messiah promised by Isaiah, from that branch of the father of King David. It's stunning that Isaiah apparently predicts that the Messiah will come from this town that was probably a deeply spiritual place and the home of devout believers.

It is in Nazareth where Jesus grew up and became the man who would be the savior. And it wasn't just small – it was widely seen as a pathetic place to live. Notice that it was so small that when Joseph had to register his family with the Roman authorities, he had to go to Bethlehem to do this, and this is why Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And interestingly, early in the Gospel of John, Nazareth is mentioned in the context of the formation of the group of twelve Apostles. Peter is telling the new Apostle Nathaniel that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies. Nathaniel doubts this very much and says: ⁴⁶ *“Nazareth. Can anything good come from Nazareth?”* This was very much the popular opinion of the day, that Nazareth was a just a poor, backwards place in the middle of nowhere. And even today, it is not a major Israeli city: the Christian

population there is Arab. Most of the population of Nazareth is Muslim.

What could possibly have happened while Jesus was growing up in Nazareth? The Bible is silent on his early years, for the most part. But consider this, from 1st Kings:

⁹ And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹¹ And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. ¹³ And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

1st Kings begins with the last years of King David's reign. It then covers Solomon's reign; he was the son of David. Solomon turns away from God; the chaotic nation of Israel divides into two nations, Israel and Judah. Jerusalem was the capital of Judah, and the northern kingdom, called Israel, included Nazareth and what is today called the West Bank. In 2nd Kings, Israel, the northern empire of the Israelites, falls to the Assyrians. Our quote comes late in 1st Kings. The prophet Elijah has challenged the evil king Ahab, who runs Judah, the southernmost of the two Israelite kingdoms. Elijah has gone into the wilderness to die because he feels he has failed in his holy mission as a prophet. He has traveled to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, where Moses sealed the Old Covenant with God. His goal is to hear God's voice and get

God's guidance. There is an earthquake, wind, and fire, but none of these things are the voice of God. The English Standard Version says ¹² *And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper.* The Revised Standard Version of the Bible gives a translation that most people are familiar with and is a bit more accurate: a "*still, small voice*", is the voice of God speaking. The Hebrew definitely uses the word "voice", and so indeed, I like that translation of God's talking: a "*still, small voice*".

We don't know much about what happened to Jesus while he was growing up and becoming a mature man in Nazareth. But I believe that God placed him there, in this small, protected, and highly blessed town so that he would not have to listen to the loud voices of hedonistic people. He spent thirty years listening only to the still, small voice of God. That was how he grew into the leader who would change the world.

Now, getting back to my tearful buddy who asked our teacher why he was being sent to the cloak room: this is what the sister said in response: "So that you can have a quiet place by yourself where you will be able to hear the still, small voice of God." I didn't know she was quoting the Bible. I thought she was simply very poetic. I learned later that this came from Scripture. I don't believe, however, that we need to find a dark cloak room so that we can hear the still, small voice of God. It helps a lot of people, I am sure, if they can isolate themselves somewhere, if they do find a quiet

place where they can be alone and contemplate God. In truth, though, God's voice, as still and small as it is, can be heard anywhere. There is no city traffic, no loud classroom, to rock'n'roll concert that is so loud that it can overcome the voice of God.

In a modern, chaotic, noisy world, we must learn to pause anywhere we are and turn to our God, the God who created the little backwater town of Nazareth so that Jesus could be molded there, and hear that still, small voice.