

Life Sunday Sermon 2021

John 1:43-51 “Invisible to Indispensable”

Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director of Mission and Ministry, Lutherans For Life
lutheransforlife.org

A precious vase tips over. In slow motion it's falling. Pottery collapses into parts and pieces. Fragments and grains disintegrate and go everywhere. What now? Gasp, cuss, weep, and sweep them up. Or track each shard down, gather the slivers together, and reconstruct more beautiful than before. The Japanese call it “kintsugi.” Don't use an undetectable adhesive or attempt to cement the ceramic so no one will notice. An artist bonds bit back to broken bit using a golden resin. The new seams glint and shimmer. A river of richness runs throughout the fractures, turning defects into features. Adept fingers craft a sculpture out of a ruptured container. What once was just fine china will be known from this moment as uniquely Japanese. Sometimes they even shatter glassware on purpose.

“We have found Jesus of Nazareth.” What now? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Pathetic, potsherd Nazareth? The ancients never indicate a Nazareth. Scrutinize the sacred scrolls in vain for Nazareth. The maps inside the front and back flaps don't bother with Nazareth. The prophets point to Jerusalem, the rabbis speak of Bethlehem, but not Nazareth. Even the atheists' documents don't mention Nazareth. It looks like a microscopic clump of huts scattered and accidentally deposited on an obscure hillside. It just lies there being an obstacle and hindrance on your way to somewhere significant. That non-place has stagnated and impoverished itself into a persistent vegetative state, an undue burden of a speck too small to qualify for calling a town and too weak to take care of itself.

You see how such a broken-down, backwards intruder consumes already limited resources and contributes little to human civilization. You know respectable folks are waiting for it to die and wishing they could get rid of it. You can't have any real kind of life in Nazareth. You're talking about Galilee of the Gentiles, that pagan pockmark on the Holy Land, parasite

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and tumor disfiguring our rightful private territory. Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Don't force your Nazareth on me!

Can anything good come from surprise pregnancy? Can anything good come out of terminal diagnosis? Can anything good come with disability? You almost can't detect any shreds of humanity left in those conditions. Their jagged edges just make the imperfections and deficiencies all the more obvious. Those situations have scuffed-up surfaces that don't give off enough gloss for our comfort, not yet anyway or not anymore. Couldn't somebody just brush or nudge them under the rug or fridge or stove somewhere out of sight?

Well, if not, if comfort must escape us, then let's take control. Sort those wrecked flecks of life by size and divide them into piles. Categorize, isolate, and disqualify the ones that don't meet the desired measure of pretty, presentable, productive, popular, prosperous, or powerful on our subjective gemological grading scale. And dress up a dustpan with delicate euphemisms for murder—like “abortion,” “embryo experimentation,” or “physician-assisted suicide” to lessen our cussing disgust as we discard them. They won't serve suitably for assembling and engineering our uniform utensils of utopia. Nothing was coming from them but suffering. All the culture's horses and all the media's men couldn't put those scraps together. Who would even want to?

Methinks we doth protest too much! We end up like Nathanael of the fourth Gospel. Poor fellow dismissed Nazareth but himself came from an uncannily similar countryside settlement just the other side of the tracks. Those sinful twins, pride and dread, occupy our hearts and cloud our eyes. We also sense our own insignificance. It compels us to compare, compete, complain, criticize, and keep score. At the same time, it cuts us down to similar size. And though in our

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brokenness we sneer, "No, you!", it takes one to know one. Human means divided. Human means dependent. Human means pieces and particles, fractions and granules, every one of us and each of you. Human means impaired and unable. We all consist of the same stuff, flung across the floor of a great big planet and tumbled under the fringes of a vast history. We've long since ceased even aspiring to amount to anything more than the kings and queens of crumbs. Can anything good come out of this fallen world at all? Can anything good come from the sinful flesh of such as you and me?

Yet something summons us: "Come and see." And Someone keeps beckoning, "Come and see." In each new human individual: "Come and see." With every additional instant of our existence, "Come and see." In every pulse that still throbs after our disobediences: "Come and see what good!" With every pant that fills these lungs even after our wickedness: "Come and see how good!" "Jesus" means "Come and see that from invisible comes indispensable!"

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Out of Nazareth comes a Father's compassion. Out of Bethlehem comes Immanuel. Out of Galilee comes God-with-us. "Come and see Jesus!" Out of an embryo in a maiden womb comes unconditional acceptance for us. Out of peasantry comes empathy for all. Out of humility comes help for everyone. "Come and receive Jesus!" Out of His servanthood comes our salvation. Out of His suffering comes your substitute. Out of His affliction comes your atonement. Out of His crucifixion comes your forgiveness. "Come and believe Jesus!" Out of His wounds comes welcome for the weakest of us. Out of Him disabling Himself with our diseases comes reconciling. Out of Him dying from our defects comes resurrecting.

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Almighty Maker takes His place among us. He stands beside the shards and slivers. The Lord our God laces and lacquers our nature with His own golden vein of gentle love and tender devotion. He reaches the broken and the abandoned. He touches the afraid and the ashamed. Jesus gathers the endangered into His thick mercy. He attaches them with His rich grace. This God wants each and every one for His vessel, whatever their age or appearance or ability. He ladles them full with words of pardon, with water of promise, with wafer and wine of presence. And He serves up the sparkle of Kingdom. He serves up the gleam of His own family. God Himself has opened heaven everlasting at the sharp edges of our fractures, right into our cracks and creases, and Christ's divine bending descending to the ground elevates humankind's own ascending to glory. Shall we not trust this rather than trash it? Let us indeed rest instead in this reality, to our good, to our common good, and to our whole and highest good!

And out of surprise pregnancy comes purpose. It belongs to Lord Jesus. Out of terminal diagnosis comes fellowship, and out of disability comes community, because Lord Jesus created each person. Out of dependency comes blessing, and out of deficiencies comes innovation, because Lord Jesus redeemed all people. Out of impairment comes improvement, and out of weakness comes comfort, because Lord Jesus calls them to be God's own temple and treasure forever. This makes humankind amazing, miraculous even, that out of invisible comes indispensable.

A man from the east used to fetch water in jars. He would hang them from either end of a staff he hoisted across his shoulders. Every day the man hauled them down to the stream, filled them heavy, and heaved them back to his house. But one of the clay jars had cracks, and it only ever arrived almost empty. This brought the jar shame and sadness. In fact, as he wept out his

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payload, he apologized for his failures to the master. The master paused for a moment, then patiently explained: “I am well aware of your flaws. Do you notice your side of the path? I planted there on purpose. And out of your flaws have come beautiful flowers!”

However apparent anyone’s inadequacies, the more evident the grace of God. The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are, on the contrary, indispensable. If one member suffers, all suffer together, and if one member is honored, all rejoice together. For God has so composed and arranged the members as He chose in His superior wisdom and delight. Lutherans For Life equips Lutherans to be Gospel-motivated voices For Life, for this kind of life with this kind of God. And we invite you to unite with us declaring it with courage and demonstrating it with compassion, until what our Savior has in store eclipses every loss and any gain that ever came before. Amen.