

Made Great

Based on Luke 1:26-38, 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16.

uch has been made of an article published by University of Iowa journalism professor Stephen Bloom in the Atlantic magazine last week. Entitled “Observations from 20 Years of Iowa Life,” the article gives a depressing, discouraging, and disparaging view of the people of Iowa. In the article, he describes the state of Iowa as “a schizophrenic, economically-depressed, and some say, culturally-challenged state.” He also writes that “Those who stay in rural Iowa are often the elderly waiting to die, those too timid (or lacking in educated) to peer around the bend for better opportunities, an assortment of waste-tooids and meth addicts with pale skin and rotted teeth, or those who quixotically believe, like Little Orphan Annie, that ‘The sun’ll come out tomorrow.’” Bloom seemed unready for the level of controversy the article said, and used claims of anti-intellectualism and provincialism against his critics. He did seem glad that he was spending the year as a visiting professor at the University of Michigan to distance himself from the backlash.

he same kind of disparaging remarks could’ve been made about Nazareth over 2000 years ago. There wouldn’t have been any meth addicts, but it seemed to fit the other stereotypes of rural life. The town is so small and insignificant that it’s not mentioned at all in the Old Testament, or in any documents contemporary to the events of the New Testament. In fact, in the Gospel of John, Nathaniel sarcastically asks “can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). Nazareth was not on any top ten towns list, and is not where you’d expect a pivotal moment in history to occur.

Even more so, the same kind of remarks could be made about Mary. We aren’t told anything about her family, her upbringing, her societal status. We’re told she’s a virgin, twice, but that’s about all we learn about her. We aren’t told much, but a teenage girl in that society, not from a prominent family, would not have been seen as very great. She’s definitely not part of the 1%. It seems that Luke introduces her in a way to emphasize her insignificance.

But of all the people in the world who have ever lived, of all the places in the world people have ever lived, it’s in backwater, small town, culturally challenged Nazareth where an angel appears to announce the conception of the Son of God. The angel

appears not to a princess in disguise, or a girl who has distinguished herself in any way whatsoever, but to a girl who seemed to still be a child herself, not someone old enough or established enough to have any child, let alone this child. God doesn’t send the angel to someone who is already great. God promises to make Mary great.

Why does God work this way? It seems that God always works this way. God doesn’t take the great and make them greater. God takes the insignificant and makes them great. We see that throughout the Bible. God picks an old man and his wife, Abraham and Sarah, and tells them to leave their home and journey to a land they’ve never seen. God uses a shepherd boy, David to take on the mountain of a man, Goliath. God then raises that same shepherd boy, who is so insignificant that his own father forgets about him, and makes him king. As we read in today’s Old Testament lesson, that same King David, near the end of his rule, wants to build a temple for God. God’s response, though, is to say that he will make David a house, a line of descendants that will endure forever. That promise is fulfilled in Jesus. That’s how David, and ultimately the whole world, will be made great.

When Jesus came to earth, he didn’t come with great fanfare. He wasn’t born into a palace, in a big city. The birth wasn’t announced in Rome or Athens or Alexandria. Angels appeared to shepherds out in the fields. A few obscure scholars came from the East. Few in Bethlehem would remember the events of that first Christmas as a pivotal moment in the history of the world. But it was a moment made great.

When Jesus went to the cross, it didn’t look like anything special, either. Another would-be Messiah crucified along with a couple of thieves. Rome again asserting its power and reminding its people not to rebel. Yet it was there that the most pivotal event in the history of the world occurred. It is there that we see our salvation. It is there, at the cross, that we see God’s grace. It is there that we are made great.

God likes to make things out of nothing. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is

foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

God still comes to those who don't deserve it, don't have any reason to have earned grace. God calls us, chooses us, not because we're healthy, wealthy, or wise. We're often none of those things. God calls us because of his grace. God doesn't call us because we're great. God makes us great.

Being made great by God doesn't mean that we'll be remembered in song and art like Mary. Being made great by God doesn't mean that we'll become powerful rulers like King David. Being made great by God doesn't mean we'll be some sort of super Christians, sharing God's grace with thousands or

more. Being made great doesn't mean that we'll be like Tim Tebow, miraculously winning football games.

Being made great by God means being chosen by God, being God's children. That's it. But that's enough.

As we enter into the week before Christmas, it's easy to try and make things great. We want to make sure that our families have a great time gathering together. We want to make sure that our kids have great presents. We want to make our house look the greatest on the block. In the midst of all of those attempts to make Christmas great, remember what made that first Christmas great. It wasn't the angels or the shepherds. It wasn't the wise men. It wasn't even Mary or Joseph. It was God, who makes greatness out of nothing. God, who doesn't care how economically depressed or culturally challenged we may or not be. God, who chooses the small things of the world to make great. That's not just good news. That's great news.

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