

January 22, 2023 – Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-25

Over a decade ago, the state of Michigan launched a massive, nationwide advertising campaign. The slogan was simple: Pure Michigan. It features commercials of young people hiking through serene pine forests. Families fishing in crystal clear rivers. Retired couples drinking coffee on a tranquil lakeshore.

It turned out to be an award-winning advertising campaign. And one that the state of Michigan desperately needed to rescue its ailing tourism industry. Because I lived in Pure Michigan during the time that the campaign was at its height. I walked through those forests. I swam in those rivers. I sat by those lakes. The images were very real.

But when people outside of northern Michigan thought about the state they didn't think about forests and rivers and lakes. They thought about Detroit and Flint and Dearborn. They thought about dirty, grey automotive plants. They thought about burned out homes and abandoned neighborhoods. They thought about crime and poverty and pollution. Michigan had developed a reputation. A bad one. And “Pure Michigan” was a desperate attempt to recast the state as a place you might just want to visit.

Once a place develops a bad reputation, it's hard to get rid of it. Las Vegas will forever be known as a place of gambling. Hollywood will forever be known as a place of film studios and celebrities. And despite the success of the campaign, it's going to take a lot more than a few commercials to shake off Michigan's reputation for heavy industry, crime, and poverty.

We see the power that a place's reputation holds in our scripture lessons for today. Though it might be a little hard to see. The passage I'm referring to is the prophecy from Isaiah which reads, *“In the former time [God] brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious... Galilee of the nations.”*

Now, that's already a nicely confused mix of strange names and geographical references. But then Matthew, in our Gospel lesson, makes it even harder for us, by failing to actually quote Isaiah. Instead, he paraphrases him and makes it virtually impossible for a modern American reader to understand what the prophecy is all about. So let me take a moment to try and sort through this jumble of information.

In the past God brought into contempt Zebulun and Naphtali. Zebulun and Naphtali were tribes of ancient Israel. Northern tribes, in fact, all the way on the northern-most border. And their combined geographical boundaries sat almost perfectly on what would come to be known in Jesus' day as the district of Galilee. So these three places that Isaiah is talking about – Zebulun, Naphtali, and Galilee – they're all the same thing. They're just three different names for basically the same place.

But this region to which he refers had developed a very bad reputation. You see, Zebulun and Naphtali were part of the northern tribes who rebelled against Judah the king who sat in Jerusalem. The civil war they started split the nation into two separate kingdoms. That's strike one.

Later, they were part of the people conquered by Assyria. They were among the first in fact, because of their position on the border. That's strike two.

And they subsequently became religiously and ethnically the same as those living in what would later be known as the district of Samaria. Men and women who had combined the worship of the one true God with the worship of Assyrian idols. That's strike three.

So for several hundred years, Galileans were considered by the Jews of Judea to be the same as Samaritans. They were corrupted Jews, guilty of idolatry and heresy. And thus rejected by God in every way.

It's only after the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great and the subsequent Maccabbean revolt that the Galileans separate from Samaria, place their faith and allegiance in the God of Judah and Jerusalem and make peace with the Jews living in Judea.

But the whole situation had definitely left them with a reputation. One that they couldn't escape. They had been conquered and reconquered. Forced to grovel at the feet of one king after another. One false god after another. Until the time of Jesus, when they sat enduring the scorn of their fellow Jewish brothers and sisters.

God had brought contempt upon Zebulun and Naphtali. They were an dirty country with a shameful history. And no one expected anything good to come from Galilee.

But as God promised and as Isaiah foretold, the people walking in darkness would see a great light. And it was part of God's unthinkable plan to bring glory to Galilee. To, first, bring the Messiah from their midst. From Nazareth, right smack in the middle of Zebulun. And then to put the very center of his ministry in Capernaum, right in the middle of Naphtali.

Do you know how many of the 12 disciples came from Galilee? Eleven. Do you know which one disciple came from Judea and not Galilee? Judas Iscariot. There's a reason why, after Jesus is arrested, the servant girl looks at Peter in the courtyard and says, "You must be one of his disciples. You're a Galilean." Jesus was known far and wide as the Galilean prophet with Galilean disciples.

So far and wide, in fact, that word began to spread about him not just to other Jews, but to Gentiles as well. "*His fame spread throughout all Syria,*" our Gospel lesson tells us. Syria! The nation that had conquered Zebulun and Naphtali. That had humbled them. That had dirtied them with a history they couldn't escape. Syria now came groveling back to Galilee, begging to see this one who could heal their sick and forgive their sins.

And then, only then, did word finally reach Jerusalem and Judea. Jerusalem who had the pride of being the first and foremost to receive every one of God's prophets and miraculous signs. Who had scorned Galilee for all those years, is the last to know about the coming of their savior.

I imagine, to the chief priests and teachers of the Law in Jerusalem, this made no sense. This was utter foolishness. To think that God would ever bring glory and honor to a place like Galilee. To think that God would ever forget the horrible history of that place. A place of rebellion and idolatry and sinfulness. Why would God ever want to set foot in a place like that?

Well, God set foot there for that exact reason. Paul spells it out for us: "*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*"

The message of the cross is foolishness, until you see it at work. To a Jew of Jesus' day, it was foolishness to think that God would honor Galilee. But he did. It was foolishness to think that God would save Syrian Gentiles. But he did.

It was foolishness to think that God would come with forgiveness and grace to a people who had long been crushed guilt. That he would send his one and only Son to come into our flesh and be executed upon a Roman cross. That he would offer the gift of eternal life not based on merits, but on the power of his Spirit and the faith planted in our hearts. That he would erase any amount of history. Any amount of rebellion and idolatry and sinfulness. But he did.

And he still does. Jesus' life and ministry were all about being foolish in the eyes of the world. But that's OK. Because if it had been about worldly wisdom and eloquent speech and coming to the people who expected God's love, the cross would have been emptied of its power.

It's not in worldly wisdom or eloquence or self-righteousness that we are saved. It's in the baffling, unexpected, utterly foolish love of Christ shown on the cross to sinners like you and me that the power of God to save truly resides.

Jesus Christ lived the Gospel. And when we are baptized into his name, he calls us to live the Gospel. And living the Gospel is about being foolish. It's about receiving forgiveness when we don't deserve it. It's about forgiving others when we don't expect it in return.

It's about following the call of God to people with a long, dark, dirty reputation. And shining the light of Christ into their darkness. Lifting the gloom of their shame. Bringing glory to those who have only known contempt.

It's about speaking to them the word of the cross. The very power of God. So that those who were once perishing become those who are being saved. Amen.