

“Finding Jesus”

Delivered Sunday, January 15, 2012 (MLK weekend)

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John1:43-51

There is a lot being said about who Jesus is in this first chapter of John’s gospel. John calls him the Word, and the Light which shines in the darkness. Then as the story of Jesus’ ministry unfolds, John the Baptist calls him “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” Andrew calls him “Rabbi,” which means “Teacher,” and he introduces his brother Simon Peter to Jesus proclaiming him the “Messiah,” God’s Anointed. It’s a grand introduction of who Jesus is: – Word, Light, Lamb of God, Teacher, Messiah – and yet Jesus himself does not stand still long enough for anyone to comprehend these lofty titles. Jesus moves through the pages of scripture as someone who has work to do, as if to say who he is cannot be separated from where he is going and what he does. We can bestow all the titles in the world upon him, but if we really want to know Jesus, we have to follow Him; we have to join with others who gather around him to go wherever he goes.

In John’s gospel, the growing refrain of these earliest disciples is simply, “Come and see, come and see.” John the Baptist started it when he told his own disciples who had been following John around the desert, “Look – here’s the One I have been telling you about all along... “Come and see.” Then in our scripture reading this morning, that’s what Phillip says to Nathaniel. In Nathaniel’s case, we discover that Jesus already knows us, even if we have no recollection of him. Nathaniel is introduced and he says to Jesus, “I don’t believe we’ve met...” but Jesus responds, “I’ve seen you and know you,” as if to echo the Psalmist *God has searched us and known us*, “Now, you come with me,” Jesus bids Nathaniel, and you will find... you ain’t seen nothing yet!”

From the other gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we have imagined the disciples’ response to Jesus’ call as such a huge, life changing moment – a drop-your-nets, quit-your-job, leave-your-family and let’s go... kind of event. But John may give us a more accessible way to think about discipleship, as more of a slow turning, a change in direction, moving forward toward an experience to come. We figure out who Jesus is – one step at a time – as we begin to walk in his path, and learn from those around us – who are also following him. The action in the text teases us to be curious about who Jesus really is, to follow signs that point to him. Did you see him? ... He just walked by... Oh there he goes ... Come, let’s see what he’s up to. You want to learn more about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? I can give you plenty of titles, but I can’t fully explain it, so we go along with him and together we will see. We will go where God is at work in the world: healing, teaching, freeing the oppressed, lifting up the lowly, welcoming all kinds of people – and there we will find Jesus. Most of us do not have some lightening bolt conversion and then become believers. Rather, we respond to Jesus’ invitation, and in the process of discipleship we come to faith.

As Dag Hammarskjold, the late United Nations Secretary and a man of deep faith, wrote in his memoirs: “I don’t know who – or what – put the question, I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.” (1) Central to our lives as Christians is the idea that God has called us to a life of meaning and purpose, and in our following Jesus we are moving toward that destination, that goal. Jesus’ followers are ordinary people who could easily go this way or that, but who – by some curiosity about what they just might see – choose to follow Jesus.

On this weekend in which the country pauses to remember Martin Luther King, Jr., I am struck with how his life as a disciple resonates with this call story. Like John the Baptist, Martin Luther King’s greatness was not due to the crowds who gathered around him, but in the fact that

he pointed beyond himself saying, “Let’s go see what God is up to.” He did not build some edifice; he led a movement. Harvard University Chaplain, Peter Gomes, wrote: “We are led to remember Martin Luther King, Jr., ...because he was in our time a part of that great company of witnesses... whom God raised up to raise us up from our bondage to the things that are, to the liberty of the things that can and ought to be. If we look for human perfection in him we will not find it, for he was a man and shared in the sins and weaknesses of our human flesh. If we look for him to be the burden-bearer of our times, our race, or our nation, we will find that he is unable to bear that burden – for he was in the struggle fully as much as we... but if we look to see in him what God is trying to do and to say... if in fact we look where he was looking, we may begin to see just what it was that sustained him, that is freely available to sustain us as well, pilgrims and saints, people always in process, always moving.” (2) That is who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ, people in process ... always moving ... people intent on following the signs that point to him, and thus to find the fullness of our own lives in Jesus himself.

Early in my ministry I had an experience of how Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed toward Jesus. I was a young Associate Pastor at Central Presbyterian Church in downtown Atlanta, when I got a call inviting me to participate in the worship service at Ebenezer Baptist Church on one of the first MLK national holidays. It was huge honor to be in that sanctuary where young Martin grew up – it was filled with dignitaries from Washington, the Vice President of the United States was there, all the King family, the giants of the Civil Rights Movement from all over the country. Had I not been invited to have a small part, I never would have gotten in the door. And I knew better than anyone that I was not there because of who I was, but because of the diversity I represented among that gathering – mainline, Protestant, white, clergy-woman.

What I was asked to do was read Martin Luther King’s favorite passage of scripture. You can imagine what immediately went through my head when I was told that – you’ll be reading Martin’s favorite passage of scripture. Maybe Exodus 7 – when the Lord God of the Hebrews said to Moses, “You go tell Pharaoh to let my people go.” Or maybe that resounding prophetic word of Amos – “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.” Surely, King’s favorite passage of scripture was one we can still hear resonating in his own voice from the Civil Rights Movement. But what I was asked to read that day was neither from the Exodus, nor one of the great prophets, but rather, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love – I am nothing ... Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude... love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things... love never ends.”

First Corinthians 13 was Dr. King’s favorite scripture. You see, he was always pointing, pointing beyond himself, pointing beyond his prophecy, beyond the Movement itself, saying “Come and see.” Come and see where Jesus himself is leading us – to the love of God for all people; to a love deeper than our deepest faith, greater than our highest hope; to a love that promises – as Jesus steps out in front of us, leading us to follow saying: “You will see greater things than these.”

## NOTES

1) Quote from John Wilderson, “Follow Me, Come and See,” 3<sup>rd</sup> Pres. Rochester, 1/15/06.

2) Peter Gomes, *Sermons*, p. 48.