



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 14, 2024
1 SAMUEL 3:1-10; PSALM 139:1-5, 12-17; GALATIANS 3:23-25; 4:4-7; JOHN 1:43-51

“THE TIME IS ALWAYS RIPE TO DO RIGHT”¹

John 1:43-51 [Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”]

I think a valid, high-level interpretation of today’s readings from 1 Samuel and the Gospel of John, might be that each tell of an obedient response to a call from God, they each look very different, but essentially, arguably that’s what’s going on. But that’s only a part of the story. Because each and

every call from God holds within it the most significant truth of our ongoing relationship with God and one another, and that is the truth of change and transformation.

Whenever an angel or a messenger of God shows up in our sacred stories, we hear time and again “fear not.” Don’t be afraid. Words

¹ *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Ed. James Washington (HarperOne, New York, NY, 1986), 296.

of reassurance. A good idea - given the understandable shock of a direct encounter with God ... but these are words that also say “change is coming” – change is coming, and don’t be afraid. Revelations from God, in all their forms ask for our response, for us to act, and our response will inevitably mean change is coming.

In a world in which there is such great injustice, in a world in which division and conflict remain well-fueled by fear and hate, in a world where so many are still denied a share of the gifts, the nourishment, and the resources of this planet, I think we might all agree that change is needed.

But this dominant culture of ours resists change, in part because the status quo has been long been set as the false alternative to an otherwise inevitable chaos. And so, for many of us, preservation of the status quo, keeping things good’n’stable, becomes our duty.

Change is softly welcomed, sure, and gently encouraged, but nothing too much, and not too fast. Transformation is accepted as a part of our call as Christians, yes, but not overnight, surely – these things, we are told,

these things, we have been told across the generations, these things take time.

It's worth noting, I think, that neither Samuel nor Nathanael hesitated, asking for things to slow down a bit, asking for some time to adjust and adapt before having to accept a change to the way things had always been.

No. God called, and they responded.

Believing a pace must be set for change is a belief born of the comfort of privilege. For all who are suffering, all whose daily lives are diminished, inflicted, limited, and too often even lost, there’s not a day to waste, not even an hour. Change is yearned for, begged for, now. Today. Justice and love today. God is calling.

And we are the ones called, to transform not only ourselves, but the world around us, to bring justice, and to love.

When Samuel was called, it wasn’t only his life that would be immediately and forever changed. When Nathanael recognized Jesus as “Son of God” it wasn’t only his life that would never again be what it had been just seconds earlier. Each would be changed, and that irrevocable change happened in a

heartbeat, *and* this change would be witnessed and felt also by the folks each of them shared their lives with. Their friends, families, communities. And it is right there, in those places, we are told time and again in the Scriptures, that the prophet, that the apostle, meets the most resistance. We're reassured: don't be afraid... yet fear of change compels folks to reject the apostle, to silence the prophet.

As the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr, whose life we honor and remember, as he became ever more involved in disruptive acts of non-violent demonstration and civil disobedience he stepped further outside the comparative safety and stability of the academic and church worlds with which he was most familiar.

His leadership in the Montgomery bus protest made him the target now of serious threats, threats of violence, and threats to his life. He writes of one night, unable to sleep, pacing in his kitchen, desperately trying to figure out how to step back from it all without

seeming like a coward, of letting folks down, he turned to God in prayer and said,

“I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid.”

At that moment, Dr King writes, he experienced the presence of the Divine as he had never before experienced it. He says,

“It seemed as though I could hear the quiet reassurance of an inner voice, saying, ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once,’ he continues, “my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”²

For those of us shaped by the dominant culture, it is, more often than not, *us* which the prophetic voice must face fearlessly, with courage and determination. It is, more often than not, *us*, using weapons of rationality and reason, who cut down the message of prophet and apostle; it is with a baseless faith in ultimate objectivity that the powerful life-changing encounters with Divine Truth of the prophet and apostle are disbelieved and

² Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2010), 117.

discredited. It is a dangerous faith in ideologies of all sorts that makes the actual lived experience of actual people, their suffering, their stories, and their truth, secondary and insufficient to prompt healing change now.

What would it be for us, instead, to listen and hear, and to have the courage to believe and affirm an experience of life in this world which is not like our own? – to believe it and to act. Act to bring justice, act in love. What would it take for us to lose all fear of the changes that are needed in the name of justice and love?

We may not choose it, but fear, Dr King reminds us, is a powerfully creative force³. Rather than recoil from fear, Dr King tells us to bring courage and love and faith (not distrust and suspicion and judgement) to

bring courage and love and faith to meet fear, to engage with it, our fear of change, our fear of conflict or challenge, our fear of reprisal or punishment, our fear of disruption or discomfort. It is our courage, our love, our faith that transforms our fear into right response.⁴

There is large-scale systemic injustice in our civic, national, and global realities, and also directly encountered, injustice on a personal, real-life lived scale, injustice experienced at the individual level, within families, workplaces, and communities.

In the words of Dr. King, “the time is always ripe to do right.”⁵

God is calling. How will you respond?

³ *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Ed. James Washington (HarperOne, New York, NY, 1986), 511.

⁴ see *Ibid.*, 512-517.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.