

I am still shaken over what happened at our nation's capitol on January 6th. My heart grieves because of the deep brokenness in our culture. In fact, I have been feeling for some time that our present context could be described by the words we find in 1 Samuel this morning where we read, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." Too frequently, the loudest religious voices in present culture have been voices of Christian nationalism which is **not** Christianity. What we saw on January 6 was the result of the fusion of fundamentalist Christian nationalism, racism, conspiracy theories, populism, white supremacist ideology, and extremism. And, as insurgents stormed the capitol, many described themselves as participants in a kind of *holy war*. It was hateful, violent, appalling, and it was **wrong**! This is NOT Christianity! This is NOT how Christians are **called** to live. These actions do **not** display the **call** to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and love your **neighbor** as yourself!

So, it is fitting that in today's readings, we hear **call** stories. **Call** stories tell us about the response of people of faith to God's **call** in their lives, and they help to inform **us** of the way **we** are **called** to live. We hear about the call of Samuel, a little boy who grew up to become one of the

great prophets of the Old Testament. In our New Testament reading, we hear Paul telling us **we** are **called** to live our lives as **faithful** Christians, thinking of our very bodies as temples, bodies **worthy** of bearing the Holy Spirit in this world. And our gospel reading tells us of the call of Philip and Nathanael, two of Jesus' first disciples.

In this gospel reading, Nathanael's call to follow Jesus is not dramatic like Samuel's. It is somewhat gradual. It evolves through engaging conversation. In fact, it seems as though Nathanael did not even want to meet this guy, Jesus. He was just doing it as a favor to his friend. When Philip tells him Jesus is the one of whom the prophets spoke, Nathanael replies by honestly speaking his mind saying, "Really? A self-appointed teacher, from that back woods, podunk, little town of Nazareth?"

Well, he quickly discovers that this guy, Jesus, at least had a sense of humor. When he meets Jesus, Jesus says, "Glad to meet you Nathanael, an *Israelite* without *deceit*." Now, this might have been a backhanded compliment. Maybe Jesus was saying he appreciated Nathanael honestly speaking his mind, because he did not seem to take offense at the whole Nazareth comment. But, we who are overhearing this conversation should understand there is a double meaning here. Jesus' calling Nathanael an "Israelite" should bring to mind the ancient story of

Jacob which is found in Genesis. Jacob, a name meaning the *deceiver* – remember he deceived his brother Esau – later became known as *Israel*.

Anyway, Nathanael is an *Israelite* without *deceit*, and this conversation marks the beginning of his relationship with Jesus. But, wait! There is more! Jesus was **not** there for Nathanael's Nazareth comment. How did Jesus know what he had said? So, Nathanael asks, "How did you know me?" Jesus then says he saw Nathanael sitting under the fig tree! How could that have been? With Jesus' words, Nathanael becomes convinced, and a confession of belief comes pouring out of Nathanael's mouth. Nathanael proclaims, "Rabbi, you **are** the Son of God."

Jesus confirms it with yet another Jacob reference – this time to Jacob's ladder. He says, "The angels will go up and down on the son of man." That is, upon **himself**. And, he is referencing Jacob's experience at Bethel, that Genesis story where heaven, the realm of God, comes so close to earth that the inhabitants of the two realms could meet. Now, in Jesus, not just in one geographical place, in this **person Jesus**, the very life of God has come near. **This** was the beginning of Nathanael's journey with Jesus, one that would take him to the most unlikely places.

This gradual conversation is important as we hear references of heaven touching earth. In this person of Jesus, heaven **has** touched earth.

Heaven is where **love** reigns. Heaven is where there is room for **all** God's children, and **all** are welcome at the table. Heaven is where **nothing** is broken, and **no one** is left out. That is the life-giving ministry Jesus brought to this earth, the ministry he lived, and the ministry into which Nathanael became a disciple. That is what the writer of John's gospel consistently refers to as **eternal life**, life that truly matters right here and right now. Wow! Quite frankly, that is **not** what we have been seeing in our present context over the past few weeks! **But**, the good news is that, in **Jesus**, heaven gets a foothold on this earth as we live into life that **truly** matters. In **Jesus**, life that truly matters **is** breaking in upon this earth. As Jim Wallis says, "In Jesus, God hits the street." And, friends, those who follow Jesus are **called** to live as **he** lived! We are called to live God's LOVE on the streets of this earth as we live in relationship to others.

Friends, this is truly an appropriate reading for this weekend as we remember and honor the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., another disciple who followed Jesus. His call to ministry was also a gradual call. Listen to how he described being called. He wrote:

My call to ministry was neither dramatic nor spectacular. It came neither by some miraculous vision nor by some blinding light experience on the road of life. Moreover, it did not come as a sudden realization. Rather, it was a response to an inner urge that gradually came upon me. This urge expressed itself in a desire to serve God and humanity, and the feeling that my talent and my commitment

could best be expressed through ministry. At first, I planned to be a physician; then I turned my attention in the direction of law. But as I passed through the preparation stages of these two professions, I still felt within that undying urge to serve God and humanity through the ministry. During my senior year in college, I finally decided to accept the challenge and enter the ministry. I came to see that God had placed a responsibility upon my shoulders and the more I tried to escape it the more frustrated I would become. A few months after preaching my first sermon I entered theological seminary. This, in brief is an account of my call and pilgrimage to the ministry.

In 1955, shortly after Dr. King began his ministry in Montgomery, AL, God guided him in new directions. Forced segregation on city buses had become an intense issue that required a response. Rosa Parks had recently been arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white person while on a city bus. With her trial approaching, local pastors gathered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to strategize. They shared ideas, but nothing emerged until a young pastor raised his hand and became the boycott leader. Just like Nathanael, the young Rev. King, experienced in Jesus life that truly matters, **the life of God come near**. God's justice **had** broken into this world and gotten a foothold through the actions of Rosa Parks. And, Dr. King invited others to join **him** as they began following Jesus into the streets, seeking justice. Dr. King was God's ambassador as God's life-giving, life-changing presence again broke into this world.

Many years later, Dr. King would describe his glimpse and vision of what it looks like when the realm of God comes near. He said:

. . . one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. (*I Have a Dream* speech)

Martin Luther King, Jr., responded to the call to follow Jesus and he followed to the unexpected places, places that **did** bring about justice and change. Quite frankly, it is **hard** to follow Jesus to some of those places, and Dr. King knew this. It was from one of those unlikely places, the Birmingham jail, that he wrote about a letter he had just received from a white brother urging caution, who had said, "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but. . . The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." Dr. King responded to him, saying:

Such an attitude stems . . . from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually . . . human progress . . . comes through the tireless efforts of (persons) willing to be co-workers with God . . . Early Christians entered a town . . . in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God . . . Small in number, they were big in commitment . . . By their effort and example, they brought an end to . . . ancient evils . . . The time is always ripe to do right. (*Letters from A Birmingham Jail*)

As we follow Jesus' call into the streets of this world, we walk in the footsteps of Samuel, Paul, Nathanael and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., living into eternal life, life that **truly** matters, while bearing God's **creative** and **redeeming** Word in this world. ***The time is always ripe to do right!***