

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

Jan. 17, 2021

Pastor Kelsey

Scripture: John 1:43-51

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 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." 46 Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" 48 Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." 49 Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" 50 Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." 51 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."

Sermon

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a day to remember the life and work of MLK and the ways that his work impacted the Civil Rights Movement. We know him for the big things, his "I have a Dream" speech, the march on Washington, his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, for his calls for peaceful protest and ultimately, and ultimately, his assassination. It is easy to think about the big legend of a figure that he is, but we don't often think about where he came from before he was the face of the movement. Before he was THE MLK, he was a young minister. It is perhaps a divine coincidence that I started reading the book I will be doing that study on during lent this week. In the first chapter, McNeil speaks about what it means and looks like to be called into something, into a form of leadership or action. She talks about it as "The Law of Timing." In this first chapter she tells the story of MLK's call into leadership of what became the Civil Rights

Movement. I will let her words speak to us. For those potentially interested in the Book Study, this can be a bit of a sneak peak:

“Consider Martin Luther King Jr. He did not plan to lead the civil rights movement, but when the movement needed a name and a spokesperson, Reverend King responded. The world was never the same. You may not be familiar with the entire story, but it began on December 1, 1955, when a woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Community activists needed a place to hold a meeting to plan the response, a proposed bus boycott, so they asked a young local minister for the use of his church to discuss the matter. That minister was Martin Luther King Jr.

The community members met and agreed to one-day boycott, which was so successful that they later agreed to extend the boycott. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was formed to run the boycott, and King was asked to lead the organization. By some accounts, King was initially reluctant, although he planned to support the boycott. He probably had many valid reasons for why he shouldn't be the leader of that burgeoning movement—he was a pastor, a husband, a father of a baby daughter, and an intellectual who wanted to write books. But his proponents were not dissuaded. He seemed ‘perfect’ for the job; he had the ‘right’ education, the ‘right’ background, and the ‘right’ skills. It seemed to them that he was prepared in advance for the position. It was a divine appointment, they thought, and King was eventually persuaded.

It has been said that King was a reluctant leader. History indicates that he did not seek the limelight or fame, but he was one for whom God's divine call could not be ignored.”¹

I have never heard of MLK being a reluctant leader, but it doesn't lessen his message or make his work any less meaningful. His reluctance but choice to follow the call puts him in good company! Moses, Noah, Esther, Jonah, Gideon, Jeremiah, Paul, and Nathanael from our scripture reading this morning.

This passage from John comes at the very beginning of Jesus's ministry, in the John narrative, it is the 3rd or 4th day of Jesus collecting disciples. The book of John is unique in how it describes Jesus gets his disciples, unlike the stories in Matthew, Mark and Luke where he pulls them from fishing and living their everyday lives. In John, Jesus meets with John's disciples and those that John had witnessed to, and those also go give witness to others. In the case of the disciples, their call to follow is both literal and figurative. Jesus comes to Philip and says, “Follow me.” Philip and the others then literally follow Jesus on his journey and follow his ideas and teachings. Philip then goes to Nathanael and tells of Jesus as the divine fulfillment of Scripture in the, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” and as fully human by naming him like anyone else would be named, Jesus son of Joseph from

¹ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Becoming Brave: Finding the Courage to Pursue Racial Justice Now* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 31-32.

Nazareth.” Nathanael responds in a way that was pretty typical for Jesus’s time on earth, with resistance and even derision, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth was known as a peasant area for the poor and laborers. Nathanael is basically saying, “Can anything good come out of that side of town?” or “Out of Detroit?” or “Out of Flint?” Philip does not argue, but just invites him to “Come and see.” Come and see Jesus for himself. Even though Nathanael had some strong doubts, he accepts the invitation and goes to see. Accepting the invitation pays off as then Jesus reveals himself to Nathanael in showing his superhuman knowledge, having known Nathanael was sitting under the Fig Tree when Philip approached him. Knowing all the incredible things that Jesus will go on to do, having Philip’s GPS coordinates, feels a bit small potatoes for Nathanael’s reaction. But, we must remember that at this point, none of the miracles had happened yet, stories of Jesus’s ministry had not yet spread around, so Jesus knowing where Nathanael specifically was without seeing him, was pretty impressive. This changed Nathanael’s mind about this dude from Nazareth, something good has come from Nazareth, and he is the “Son of God, King of Israel.” Jesus seems to agree with our questioning of the divine GPS being so spectacular with his response, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” I love a sassy Jesus moment, but below the potential sass here, Jesus is really telling Nathanael that his journey is just beginning. It is less, “You were impressed by that? Pssh this is nothing.” and more, “If you believe this, just you wait for what you will see!” Then Jesus turns to the greater crowd and promises to continue revealing who he is to them using imagery of the descent of the Son of Man from Daniel and Jacob’s Dream ladder from Genesis, except now, the angels are focusing on Jesus instead of the ladder. Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Making these references to the Old Testament in this way is Jesus confirming what Philip said of him in the beginning of this passage. Jesus is the fulfillment of the scriptures and human on earth, he is the bridge between the human and divine, a major theme of the book of John. In this declaration, Jesus is highlighting for them that he is inviting them into being a part of this activity of God’s on earth.

This story tells us of a very literal invitation to follow Christ, an invitation from a friend and Jesus himself, in the flesh, to come be a part of his ministry. Stories like this make it seem so easy! I don’t know about you, but I sure wish Jesus could stand right in front of me and tell me what he knows I should do next. Maybe even grab my hand and drag me along if need be! How much easier it would be for all of us if we could all walk up to Jesus and be like, “What’s the deal with you and what should I do about it?!” I am sure that exact sentence is what Nathanael was planning on saying to that dude from Nazareth that his buddy insisted he had to meet, y’know before Jesus beat him to the chase, complimented him, and then revealed he was the real deal. Maybe we wish we could be like Nathanael and already know exactly what following the Messiah should

look like. Once Nathanael knew Jesus was legit, he sure knew the proper response and knew to follow Jesus on the road like a groupie. I know a lot about life back then was not simpler, but knowing the response to follow Jesus is to literally follow him sure sounds a lot simpler than today where it means deciphering a bunch of scripture and trying to apply it to modern context and fighting with your distant relative on facebook who is a different denomination on what it means, well, or at least hearing a bunch of different messages from different preachers and radio stations and televangelists, and then having to apply it and live it out! It is surely a bit harder to hear the call and act on following it, when Jesus is not standing here in front of us or we most often don't hear God speaking in our ears like when God calls Samuel during the night.

Despite the fact that our situation is a lot different than the disciples', we can still learn a few things about what it means to follow Jesus. First, Philip and Nathanael are equal disciples and equally welcomed by Jesus even though Philip's response to follow Jesus was immediate and to the point, and Nathanael had some doubts and questions he needed answered. Both are welcomed and included as Disciples, it is the same for us, all who come to follow Jesus are equally accepted and loved and considered Disciples no matter our journey to get there. Second. When we look at this passage a little more literarily, the number of names for Jesus becomes clear. The longest of them being, "Him about whom Moses in the law and also the Prophets wrote," but also "Son of Joseph of Nazareth, Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel, and Son of Man. It is not a mistake to name Jesus in so many ways. This collection tells us of how each character sees Jesus differently and met the needs of each one differently. For one he was a teacher, for another the Messiah, for another the fulfillment of Scripture. Jesus is all of these things! We do not have to see Jesus in one specific way to be a Disciple or follower, but we do need to be open to the idea that Jesus is not encapsulated by any of those terms. As Jesus says, they will see greater things. Our idea of Jesus can shift and change and grow as we go along our faith journey. This is a reminder to us all to keep our eyes open for a surprising revelation of God, a surprising new idea or understanding of God that can change our journey going forward. Even moreso, Nathanael's oopsies of speaking down about the dude from Nazareth, "What good can come out of Nazareth?" is a reminder to us to never profile or disregard someone's potential to teach us about God and faith in a new way because of any demographic. Third! This whole interaction is a dialogue and full of active verbs. This pulls us into the interaction between Jesus and Nathanael and tells us that the life of discipleship is an active one. As the story tells us about following, seeing, seeking, staying, finding and while in conversation with Jesus, it is telling us that being a true disciple means action continuing to interact with Jesus. We don't just say, "Yes, Jesus I will follow you!" and call ourselves set and good! We continue the conversation with Jesus, we continue watching what Jesus is doing around us and keep in conversation with Jesus on what we do next.

Again, this easily sounds like we can expect a direct conversation like Nathanael had with Jesus or even a one-sided conversation like Samuel had with God in the night. Alas, we don't always hear God that clearly. In fact, I rarely hear someone say they literally had a back-and-forth conversation with God. This makes things a bit harder. We are often unsure if we are getting a nudge from God or if we are making it ourselves. Or maybe you feel called or drawn toward doing something, big or small, but you can't believe that you are qualified enough or good enough or skilled enough to do it. Perhaps you sometimes think of yourself the way that Nathanael thought about the dude from Nazareth. Perhaps you have heard something from someone that reverberates with you as from God, but then you look at where the idea came from and think that it can't be from God. Or maybe none of that, but maybe you are expecting and waiting for some world shifting, life altering call from God that will change everything like it did for the Disciples who left everything behind to follow Jesus. Those calls happen. I'm here in ministry because of one. MLK became the face of a movement because of one. But God also calls all of us to little things, or day-to-day things as well. MLK wouldn't have had to be a face of a movement if there weren't all those people marching behind him. Perhaps the call right now is not to some huge life plan shift, but is instead to finally have that conversation with your coworker about a justice issue, or to volunteer for or donate to an organization doing work that you find important. Maybe your current call is to be a bit more open about your beliefs and stand your ground when you hear something that goes against how Jesus would want it to be. Maybe your current call is to spend some time educating yourself on an issue that keeps landing in front of you but you don't know much about.

Our calls are all different, our responses will all be different, but if you stay in conversation with Jesus, keep your relationship with God active through coming to see and seeking and questioning, our journeys with God will continue and Jesus promises that we will "see greater things than these." Our journeys will continue and we will get to see Jesus doing some great things along the way. Let us all be bold like Nathanael and be willing to accept the invitation to come and see what Jesus has in store for us as we follow where he leads.

Let us pray.

Open our ears, O God, that we might hear your Word speaking to us in this moment. Open our ears, O God, that we might listen for your voice calling to us through scripture. Open our ears, O God, that we might understand your promises to followers both old and young, ancient and modern. Open our hearts, O God, that we might enter into the love you offer us. Amen.