

COME AND SEE: Barack, Martin, You and Me, All Being Called

A 2PB Sermon given by Dan Stern on January 18, 2009.

As we gather this Sunday and the next to worship and build community in this place, we all have this grand opportunity. It's an opportunity we may always have, but don't always realize its momentous potential. We don't realize it because human beings are so often mired in our rather strong fears and doubts. But we seem now to be collectively more aware than we have been for some time that we're on the edge, at the eve...of something. Some think we must be at the eve of destruction, on the edge of disaster; after all, few have escaped being negatively affected by dramatic financial losses, global wars appear to be getting worse, environmental catastrophes – each year more intense, and not a one of us escapes the inevitable fact of our own individual deaths either. But for many others especially the young, it feels just now like Camelot again, the age of Aquarius, the dawn of a kind of harmonious convergence not felt so powerfully in our nation since 1961 when John F. Kennedy was inaugurated. Right now, young people all over the world are inspired to chant “Yes, we can” like Martin Luther King and the early Civil Rights volunteers sang “We shall overcome”, like Kennedy when he sending off a generation into the Peace Corps, said “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country”, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt when he said, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” Right now we have this opportunity to be instructed mightily by scripture, by an awareness of history, and by momentous events taking place in the life of our nation. Right now people of faith can know, can be acutely aware, that we are again being called of God. We are being called as individuals, called as church, called as a nation, and called as one world citizens.

We are being called of God through our acquaintance with timeless scripture. At this point it might be helpful you to do something embarrassingly old-fashioned and open up your blue pew Bibles to the back New Testament section to p. 94 (Holy Bible with the Apocrypha, NRSV, Oxford). Note in John 1, verse 43 – it is the passage Marilyn just read for us – that Philip is the first person in Galilee to whom Jesus offered his famous 2-word invitation, “Follow me.” And remarkably, Philip does just that! It's significant that it's Philip who's first to follow, because immediate acceptance of such a life-altering invitation is especially out of character for this individual. Later passages in the gospels show Philip to be a particularly cautious and deliberate man, one who would be slow to make decisions. Philip was the one who told Jesus, just prior to the feeding of the 5,000, that even if they spent all the money they had, they wouldn't be able to buy enough bread to feed even a little to all the people who were hungry. Philip was the kind of person who would call himself a realist; of course we need some of those! But too-narrowly-perceived limits to what is possible suggest unrealized potential, and eventually lead to despair. “But, despair is (terribly) presumptuous, because despair says something about reality and about the future we can't know” (Ann W. Claypool). Who can predict what is impossible? Who could have said that the blind would see, that the dead would be raised? That an African American would be our nation's President, that an openly Gay Episcopal Bishop would be bringing one of his inaugural invocations? Yet in spite of his usual tendencies, somehow Philip had become convinced to follow Jesus. The next thing we know, he's finding his friend Nathanael and saying, “We've found the one we've been looking for!” At last! At long last! Change is here, hope is in the air. It's exactly how a nation, an entire emerging world, is feeling right now, precisely because so much is at stake, with the economy in a tailspin, with seemingly nothing else to pin any hopes on. But then, in verse 46, it's Nathanael who's sarcastic and skeptical.

“Come on, Philip.” “How can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth is nothing. A Nazarean is a nobody. Can anything good come from out of nothing, out of nowhere? By this time Philip believes it to be so. But he doesn’t argue with Nathanael. He doesn’t even have to say, “Yes! Oh yes! A thousand times, Yes!” He simply, calmly invites. “Come and see for yourself.” (Cynthia Anderson:) “He invites Nathanael to come and see, and walks with him to where Jesus is. Then it’s Nathanael’s turn. And Nathanael does just as Philip has invited him to do, he sees for himself. Actually, it’s more accurate to say that Jesus sees Nathanael. Jesus saw him coming, in verse 47 pays him a complement, even. And as it turns out, “it’s not so much what Nathanael sees about Jesus that changes things, but what Jesus sees about Nathanael. This says a lot about how we help others see too. We hardly have to argue. We simply invite, and we simply accompany, we show others respect. And the next thing you know, being seen and known by Jesus turns an ordinary encounter into a life-changing one. “Where did you get to know me, Jesus?” I’ve heard this said as a preacher “I thought you were speaking directly to me!” Jesus – “I saw you...under the fig tree.” “Oh my Lord, you are the Son of God!” “What? You believe simply because I saw you under the fig tree Jesus, in your own humble, nobody, nowhere place in life? Believe you me, you’re gonna see greater things than these!”

We are being called of God through our acquaintance with scripture. We are also being called of God through an awareness of historic periods of great social change. See if you recognize these excerpts from a famous letter written on April 16, 1963 – My Dear Fellow Clergyman: (excerpts from “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” by M. L. King)

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.”

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes.

I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is now law at all."

I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

Yet I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.

If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.

I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have gone down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. They have gone to jail with us. Some have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation – and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the external will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

We are being called of God through our acquaintance with timeless scripture, and though an awareness of historic periods of great social change. We are also being called of God by momentous events taking place right now in the life of our nation. Once, during another time of widespread anxiety and despair, the African American poet Langston Hughes asked us, “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up, like a raisin in the sun? Or does it...explode?” Dreams of late have again been long deferred: for some of us they had almost dried up entirely. Suddenly dreams are exploding awake; new generational hopes are being born again. Our nation's new young President –elect is cautioning us to realize that he's not the Messiah, that yes, we can, but it's up to all of us at the grassroots of democracy to be that we, and determine what the future will hold. So for example, today we'll take that charge from our President Elect seriously, and stay a short while during coffee hour to discuss our hopes, dreams and plans for universal health care. Why really? Because we're still listening for God's call.

You and I are being called of God as individuals, as a church, as citizens of a particular nation, as citizens of one world. “The sacred call comes to us, and it is transformative. It is an invitation to our souls, a mysterious voice reverberating within, a tug on our hearts that can neither be ignored nor denied” (David Cooper). We are called to as generously participate as Philip did when he not only invited Nathanael, he also walked with Nathanael, to the very place, and person through whom the light was breaking after long years of darkness, who embodied all those exploding dreams that had been so long deferred. But wait. Are any of you still so dubious, often disappointed realists that you just can't get with the spirit of these times?

Maybe you're still even if not dripping with sarcasm, saying Come on, Dan, “Can anything good come out of Broadview?” Of course it can! Yes we can! Come and see. In our kind of church, it's always a grassroots movement, one that keeps telling friends and neighbors to “come and see” again and again. One that keeps walking – or driving – them over too, and sitting in, or taking a stand next to them, accompanying them, in fact, through all their goings in and comings out. Ann Claypool: “I think we are never closer to the primal joy of existence than when we let

the flow of grace come into us gratefully and move out through us generously. May we all, with Jesus and Philip and Nathanael, with M. L. King and now, with Barack Obama too – hear with a rich infusion of hope the call of God for our time. Amen.