

Called to See

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January 14, 2023

Psalm 139:1-12

¹O Lord, you have searched me and known me. ²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. ⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. ⁷Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. ⁹If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, ¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. ¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," ¹²even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

John 1:43-51

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip 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.” ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

⁵⁰Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And 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.”

Last Sunday we considered the meaning of Jesus' baptism. We heard how he got in line with the others at the Jordan River to be baptized by John. The heavens were ripped open; a voice declared Jesus the Son of God, fully human – fully God. Through his baptism, God reveals how we begin being drawn into God's divine purposes. Today, and for the next couple of weeks, the gospel leads us through stories of Jesus' calling followers. They further show how we are immersed in Jesus' work.

Lutheran pastor and professor, Richard Lischer recalls how in one of Flannery O'Connor's stories, a little Catholic girl called "the child" lives with her relatives in a small southern town. Having grown up in a sea of southern Protestants, and a devout Catholic herself, Flannery O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," may be somewhat autobiographical. In the story the little Catholic girl enjoys visiting the convent where one of the sisters always embraces her as she leaves. But every time she gets a hug, the crucifix on the sister's belt gets mashed into the child's face. The reader is left to imagine how the gesture of love always leaves a mark. Richard Lischer says, "Baptism is like that. In Christ, God gives us a hug, but that act leaves the sign of the cross upon us to remind us of the One whose name we bear."¹

The gospel stories of Jesus' calling followers, today and the next couple of weeks are variations on this theme. In our baptism like Jesus we too are named Child of God, marked for God's purposes. Because God's love, grace and forgiveness leave a mark on us! When our brother Jesus calls us to follow, our humanity is indeed drawn into his divine work. John's account of Jesus calling disciples is different from the other gospels. Next Sunday we will meet up again with Simon and Andrew casting their fishing nets, with James and John leaving their father Zebedee behind in the boat. But John's gospel, you remember, was the last of the four to be written, and it is more theologically dense, full of signs and wonders.

¹ Richard Lischer, *Just Tell the Truth: A Call to Faith, Hope, and Courage*, p. 156.

According to John, the disciples don't just get up and go – at the drop of a net – and without a word; they engage Jesus in conversation. “What are you looking for?” Jesus asks the first ones called. “Where are you staying?” they respond, and he says, “Come and see.” Then, on the second day of disciple recruitment, which is our text for this morning, Philip encourages Nathaniel to come along, but Nathaniel stops and wonders about Jesus, saying: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth was a tiny town which carried no Messianic expectations. For Nathaniel this rhetorical question was a provincial slur; for us it's a reminder that God enters the world in unexpected places. To Nathaniel's initial skepticism, Jesus asks: “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” In John's gospel, seeing is defined as recognizing Jesus as God's own.

In today's Psalm, just read and sung, Psalm 139, we are assured that God sees us. God searches for us; God knows us; God follows us. Responding to God, we take those very actions upon ourselves. The call to follow Jesus becomes our opportunity to search, and to know, and to follow in order to see as God sees. To assure that no one remains unknown, no one is left to journey to hell and back alone, no one is left alone in complete darkness.

According to John, the Call of Jesus is demanding, but never coercive. It is primarily an invitation to keep our eyes open. Jesus does not say: To begin with, there are seven habits of a highly successful disciple. Jesus does not say: If you believe this, this and this, then come along. Jesus does not say: Follow me and your life will be flawless and your welfare exemplary. Jesus does not even say: Follow me and I will show you exactly where we are going. Jesus simply says, “Come and see.”

What does this open-ended invitation mean for us who have somehow, somewhere experienced a call to follow Jesus? First, we do not all see the same thing. Our vocations, our avocations, our communities, our individual lives lead us in different directions to see where our gifts for

God's good work are called forth to serve. Secondly, the invitation to come and see means we have enormous freedom and responsibility to figure it out, to apply our own spiritual gifts and tangible resources where we see the need.

Of course, we are not completely on our own to figure it out, because Jesus left us plenty of guidance for discerning where discipleship leads: by the company he kept among sinners and outsiders, by the political and religious systems he ran up against and questioned, by his healing presence among all kinds of people wherever they had need, by what he said about compassion and humility, about love and forgiveness, about treasure and how to invest it. We are given a lot of information about what it means to follow Jesus Christ, but it's hardly a road map with clear directional signs. Each of us will be called down different paths of discipleship according to what we see and the gifts we bring to further the gospel. The community of the church will also see where we are being called together to serve according to the stewardship of our resources. As a community, and as individuals, we discern God's calling to keep our eyes open to the world of need around us.

In light of this Call to see, on this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, I am reminded of a key moment during the Civil Rights Movement when new eyes were opened to perceive God leading our country forward toward a more just and equitable society. It was a moment following a bigger, louder turning point in the movement, but it bears witness to the power of Jesus to help us keep our eyes open as we follow him.

Looking back upon his involvement Andy Young recalls that Spring weekend in Birmingham in 1963, when the Civil Rights Movement picked up new steam – in large part because of Police Chief Bull Connor's dogs and fire-hoses which had been turned on the marchers that Good Friday. That was the day Dr. King was arrested, put in solitary confinement and began writing his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. That's also the day seared in our memories because of film footage of those dogs and fire-hoses violently turned on young people. The nation's

visual access to that violence on the evening news that night was pivotal in turning the tide of the movement toward greater justice. Andy Young recalls the details of another march two days later, on Easter Sunday. It may have received less attention in the annals of history, but I believe demonstrates the power of this Call to See.

After Dr. King was arrested, the second march that Easter weekend was from New Pilgrim Baptist Church to the Birmingham jail, where Dr. King and a host of other ministers were behind bars. The purpose was to gather outside the jail to sing a few songs and to have a word of prayer on Easter Sunday.

But, on their way to the jail, the thousands of marchers were blocked again by police barricades, barking dogs and fire trucks. Bull Connor demanded that Andy Young and the other leaders disperse the crowds and turn them around. "I know I didn't want to turn the march around, whatever the consequences," Young has written. "So, to get myself together and as a holding action, I told people to get down on their knees to pray. While this was going on, another leader and I went up to try to reason with Connor. We were pleading our case with him, while the people were behind us on their knees praying. All of a sudden, one of the most faithful and fearless leaders of the Birmingham movement jumped up and hollered: "The Lord is with this movement! We are going on to the jail! Off your knees!" Everybody in the front rows got up and started walking right toward the barricades and mass of police. Stunned at first, Connor yelled: Stop 'em, Stop 'em.' But the police didn't move a muscle. "I've never seen anything like it," Young continued. "They stood there watching us as if they were transfixed. The firemen just stood there holding their hoses. We walked right on past them and Connor yelled, 'Turn on the hoses, turn on the hoses!' But they didn't move. I saw one fireman, literally with tears in his eyes, just let the fire hose drop to his feet. Our people marched right between the red fire trucks, singing 'I Want Jesus to Walk With Me.'

We marched down to the park across from the jail, where we reconvened to sing to the people in the jail. Connor stood there cussing and fussing. His policemen had refused to arrest us, his firemen had refused to hose us, his dogs had refused to bite us. “I’ll never forget one old woman who got happy when she marched through the barricades,” Andrew Young remembers she shouted, “Great God Almighty done parted the Red Sea one more time!”²

The Civil Rights Movement was – at its heart a religious movement, a gospel movement, a discipleship movement – because of a people who were keeping their eyes open. They experienced their call to follow Jesus Christ to keep their eyes open to the needs of those around them and to the manner of Jesus Christ: With non-violence, justice, equity and dignity for all people, for all of God’s Beloved children. The same call of Jesus extended to them in those days is our call today. It’s a call to spread our faith that all people are made in the image and likeness of God, no matter their race, nationality, or station in life. It’s our call to work toward God’s promised day of justice and peace in like manner: In these violent days, with non-violence; in this time of inequality, with equity; and in this season of incivility, with dignity for all people, for all of God’s Beloved children.

We may not all experience the call to follow the same way, and each of us will follow according to our individual gifts for service. But together – as the church – gathered around the stories of Jesus, it is not hard to see the path he lays before us. Love your neighbor, welcome the stranger, break down the barrier, heal the sick, and share good news with the poor. We bear the mark of the One who names us Christian. At the invitation, “Come and see,” each of us is called to follow, and all of us together will see greater things than these.”

AMEN.

² Andrew Young article in *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* taken from Tardlaw’s Moveable Feast paper on this text.