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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B3

2 Epiphany (Year B) 11:00 a.m. Online Worship

Sunday 17 January 2021 Martin Luther King, Jr. Sermon

1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-

Psalms 139:1-5, 12-17

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1: (35-42) 43-51

Come and See: The Calling of Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. "What are you looking for?" These are the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John. It is a good question for us too. What is making you dissatisfied or causing suffering? What will bring you relief? What do you want?

It could be healing, security, respect or just to hear from your children or feel connected to your friends. Maybe you want your life to make a difference. Or maybe through this time of turmoil you don't even know what you are looking for. You just want to feel okay again. What we seek tells us something about how we understand God. If nothing else, over the years people who pray begin to finally realize what it is that they really want.

Emblepo is a wonderful Greek word. It describes the experience of looking into someone's face and really seeing that person. The ancient writer Philo uses it to mean clarity of vision, true insight, a "grasping of transcendent matters."¹ This word describes how John the Baptist sees deeply into who Jesus is. Then he says, "Behold, the lamb of God" (Jn. 1). Hearing this two of his disciples go to approach Jesus. Jesus asks what they are seeking. Perhaps they are flustered but all they can manage to say in reply is, "where are you (and the Greek word means) staying or abiding or remaining." Jesus knows what they really hunger for and he says to them, "Come and see."

On a spring Sunday in 1934 an evangelist came to visit the packed sanctuary of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. In those days the five year old Martin Luther King, Jr. was known as M.L. His maternal grandfather had founded that church and his father was the Senior Pastor. For the rest of his life he remembered that day – the choir, the clapping, the energy of the moment. When that guest preacher invited people to come up to join the church, his sister Christine was the first one to stand.

M.L. immediately ran ahead of her, not as he was later to say out of some "dynamic conviction," but because of a, "childhood desire to keep up with my sister." Even at his baptism King was "unaware of what was taking place." Hearing God's call did not happen for him in an single powerful moment but was a matter of gradually taking in what he learned from his family and church.²

2. Today scripture confronts us with so many different ways of encountering God, of hearing God's invitation to come and see, to walk through the doorway into a holy life. Samuel is a kind of apprentice to the priest and sleeps in the Temple next to the most sacred object of his people's faith, the "ark of God" (1 Sam. 3). Three times Samuel is awakened by what he thinks is the priest calling him. Each time he goes to Eli who finally tells him that the next time the voice calling he should reply by saying, "Speak Lord for your servant is listening." Samuel does this and God then says to him, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle."

Have you ever wondered how you can know that it is really God speaking to you, and not just your ego or insecurity? The seventeenth century Puritan Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) wrote a lengthy theological treatise about this subject that I find still helpful today.³

This story about Samuel seems to suggest that among other things a calling from God is a prompting or encouragement, an intuition that persists and repeats. We really begin to hear when we make time and space in our life for stillness and reflection. Often another person (like Eli) helps to confirm our interpretation. Finally, at some level of our being we have to want to understand if God's invitation is going to reach us.

Today's gospel helps us to appreciate what a different experience each of Jesus' disciples had.⁴ One of the disciples of John the Baptist who went on to follow Jesus is unnamed but the other is Andrew. Jesus invites him to "come and see." He recognizes who Jesus is by spending time with him ("remaining" with him that day).

Andrew enthusiastically tells his brother. Our state motto is "Eureka" it means "I found it." This is the word Andrew uses saying, "we have found the Messiah... Christ). Andrew brings Simon to Jesus. Jesus looks into him (in the way I described earlier *emlepo*), says his name and renames him Cephas or Peter which means rock.

Philip comes from the same town as Andrew and Peter and we don't know how he first encountered Jesus as the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. He brings his friend Nathanael to meet him. Nathanael is cynical and doubting maybe even derisive. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" But even as he approaches Jesus calls out, "Behold here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit?"

Incredulously Nathan asks, "where did you get to know me." And Jesus tells him, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." The electricity of this connection still shocks us twenty centuries later. Philip replies, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are

the King of Israel." This foreshadows the sign that the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate hangs at Jesus' crucifixion.

Cynical, open, doubting, needing to see for one's self, depending on the testimony of a respected family member or friend. Each of us comes to Jesus in a way adapted to our personality and circumstances. You may be the way by which someone learns about Christ. In these difficult times through your faith you may help to save someone who might otherwise be lost.

3. The great preacher and writer Fredrich Buechner famously defines what a vocation is. He writes, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." This sentence has been profoundly true for me. The idea behind it inspires me just about every day. I feel blessed to love what I do. I enjoy preaching, pastoral care and being part of a community that seeks to feed a world that seems so hungry for spiritual nourishment.

But my friend Matt Boulton reminds us that when God calls Moses from the burning bush his first response is to say, "Lord please send someone else" (Ex. 4:13). So Matt gives us what he calls another, and complimentary, truth. He says, "the place where God calls you to is the place where your deep discomfort and the world's deep blessings meet."⁵

I believe both joy and discomfort are ways that God moves us and draws us to discover a truer version of ourselves. When I really listen to God these days what I hear is that this is our time to repair the damages to the fabric of humanity through racism and poverty. It is our time to heal the earth. The extraordinary inequality we see in this country, the mass incarceration of African American people, an inadequate response to the AIDS crisis, along with the crack cocaine and opioid epidemics, the rising tide of homelessness, climate change, these all happened on our watch. Why do we tolerate so much human suffering? Is it because we think that some people and the planet must suffer in order to give everyone else the incentive to work? Is it because we really believe there are not enough good things to go around?

Martin Luther King Jr. taught that time is not biased in favor of human progress. Things will not just get better on their own. We are responsible to make things better, to support the dignity of the people around us. This change means that we have to give up the idea that we will always feel comfortable about what is happening.⁶

Some of us will say yes to ministries that bring us right to the edge of what we think we can handle. And yet, just as we receive our calling to act from Jesus, our help comes from him too.

There was a time when Martin Luther King, Jr. learned from reliable sources that there was a plan to have him assassinated. In a speech he talked about his death and asked his supporters to never retaliate with violence. King knew that in an instant his wife and daughter could be taken away from him and the fear kept growing in him. One night he came home late from a meeting. In the late hours of the night he was trying to sleep when the phone rang. An ugly voice threatened to shoot him and blow up the house if he didn't leave town in three days.⁷

King got up, went down to the kitchen and started pacing as he brewed a pot of coffee. He thought about what he had learned about evil as a theologian. He wondered if there was any honorable way for him to step away from his commitments. Finally, he sat down put his head on the table and prayed. "O Lord I'm down here just trying to do what is right... but I'm weak... I'm afraid... I have nothing left." Tears came to his eyes.

And then he felt a kind of presence and then an inner voice which said with assurance, "Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you until the end of the age." He later said that that was the voice of Jesus who promised that he would never be left alone. God was no longer an idea, an abstraction, or a "metaphysical category." The living God was close to him and would never abandon him.

Jesus asks us, "What are you looking for?" He knows that the short answer to this is that we deeply desire the one who "has searched us out and known us" (Ps. 139), the one who loved us before anyone else, the one who abides with us forever. Jesus invites us to come and see, to listen for his voice in moments of stillness and to follow where he leads. This will involve the joy of really seeing into who other people are. And it will mean speaking honestly about injustice even when it makes others and ourselves uncomfortable. What are you looking for? Come and see.

Years later on the eve of his death Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to a crowd about his own death. He said that like Moses he had been to the mountaintop and had a glimpse of a promised land in which every person was treated with dignity. That night he said, "With this faith, I will carve a tunnel of hope from a mountain of despair... With this faith, we will be able to achieve this new day, when all of God's children – black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics – will be able to join hands and

sing... in the spiritual of old, 'Free at last,' 'Free at last,' Thank God almighty we are free at last.'"⁸

¹ "Grasping transcendent matters" comes from one of the Bauer Greek lexicon editions. See Herman Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T&T Clark, 2005) 102.

² Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (NY: Harper and Row, 1982) 1-2.

³ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*, 1746.

⁴ I asked that Jn. 1:35-42 be added to today's reading. I hope it's not too much.

⁵ Matthew Boulton, "Come and See: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany Week Two," SALT, 11 January 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/1/9/lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-2>

⁶ Mitchell Weiss, "We the Possibility: It's Helping Time," *Harvard Business School*, 7 January 2021. <https://www.hbs.edu/news/articles/Pages/we-the-possibility-its-helping-time.aspx>

⁷ Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (NY: Harper and Row, 1982) 84-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 467-8.