

## Sermons from St. Thomas

# I Saw You

*Second Sunday after the Epiphany, 18 January 2015: I Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; I Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51.*

We remember the Rev'd Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for many, many things. But one was his ability to turn a phrase –

*I have a dream that one day my four little children will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*

*Faith is taking the first step when you don't see the whole staircase.*

*We will either live together as brothers or perish together as fools.*

*The time is always right to do what is right.*

His words compelled people to action. They revealed ways our nation was not living up to our ideals. His words gave us a new vision for ourselves. Though we still have so far to go to create God's beloved community, it is amazing to see how far we've come, in part because of the words of Martin Luther King.

So for the next several weeks, during this season after Epiphany, I turn our attention and our ears to the words of Jesus, hoping that they can do for us even more than what Dr. King's words did. Each week for these Sundays leading up to Lent I'll focus on something Jesus says in the gospel lesson for the day.

I'll admit the phrase that jumped out first to me in this lesson is the phrase Come and See. In verse 39 of this chapter of John, before this particular lesson, Jesus spoke to two disciples who started following him. They asked, "Rabbi, where are you staying," and he said to them, "Come and see." It is the first instruction given by Jesus in John's gospel. So it makes perfect sense that the phrase was very quickly repeated by another disciple. When Jesus called Philip to follow him, Philip found Nathanael and invited him to go along. Nathanael was hesitant. He wondered about Jesus' background. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Philip said "Come and see."

Jesus invited his first disciples on a journey of discovery and wonder and openness, and the disciples repeated that invitation. We repeat it still today in the prayer we pray after every baptism. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart. When we pray this prayer we are repeating this first instruction of Jesus – come and see what life with God is all about. Be open to possibility. Let go of preconceived notions about God because the love of God is broader than anything you can possibly imagine. Come and see.

But though Jesus did say this phrase somewhere in John's gospel he did not say it in the lesson we read today. Philip said it. So I turn our attention to something Jesus said to Nathanael.

We don't know much about Nathanael, other than what his own words reveal about him. Perhaps he sincerely questioned whether the one spoken of by the prophets could come from Nazareth, when the scriptures expected him to come from the line of David and Bethlehem. Or maybe he was prejudiced against the rural country folk who lived in Nazareth. Very little is mentioned about Nathanael in the rest of the gospels. In an attempt to make the various lists of twelve disciples align neatly some suggest that he and Bartholomew were the same person, but that is speculation.

So Nathanael was not a big player in the story. He was not part of the inner circle with Peter, James, and John. We know almost nothing about him. But Jesus said to him, "I saw you."

"I saw you when you were sitting under the fig tree before Philip called you."

We are tempted to take statements like this from Jesus and assign them to the miracle category. How cool is that! Jesus could see Nathanael before he even showed up in front of him.

But Jesus was not speaking about his eyesight or even some sort of divine mental telepathy.

Jesus SAW Nathanael. Jesus noticed him. Jesus knew him, in his confusion and struggles and preconceived notions and wondering. Jesus SAW him.

This is incredible good news for us. Jesus SAW Nathanael. And Jesus sees us. Whatever the circumstances of our lives – unemployment, illness, family strife, grief, addiction, we may have hurt others, ways others have hurt us, things we hide, things we wish were different – whatever the story, Jesus sees us. He notices us. He looks with compassion on our weakness and fear. We live all our lives under his loving gaze. This is the gospel.

But the gospel is not just good news for us. It is good news for the whole world. The loving gaze of Jesus rests on every human being.

The cover of the most recent issue of *Pathways*, our diocesan magazine reads, "We feel invisible." There are just a few copies left in the narthex. I'm sure it will soon be posted online at the website of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. This issue focuses on vulnerable populations in Georgia and ways congregations in our diocese are reaching out to them in the name of Jesus – prisoners, returned military members, immigrants, and children.

One of the articles is about Path to Shine, a tutoring program started by Deacon Lesley-Ann Drake which we have replicated here in Columbus through our work in the Boxwood neighborhood. Another article is about a food pantry in Dunwoody, Malachi's Storehouse. Another article is about Vicky Partin's work here in Columbus through Chattahoochee Valley Episcopal Ministry.

And one priest from Macon, Joseph Shippen, wrote about his years of ministry with people on death row. He wrote, “I recognize the shame of associating with this population. I am truly sorry for any offense my ministry may cause someone, especially if that person has been a victim of violent crime. When I go to prison, I feel these feelings as much as anyone. But I hold these feelings with the belief that to Jesus these outcasts are infinitely valuable. It does not matter if they are innocent or guilty.”

And then he wrote, “The ministry of accompanying someone in prison, especially someone on death row, is first and foremost about seeing. It is about saying that everyone is infinitely valuable – even those thrown into a cage or put to death on a gurney. Being a follower of Jesus means saying that no one is disposable to our God of love.”

Jesus said to Nathanael, “I saw you sitting under the fig tree.” Nathanael, the almost unknown disciple, was not unknown to Jesus. Jesus saw him.

So I invite you this week to do two things. First, if you are hurting or grieving or worried or lonely, spend some time in prayer this week meditating on the eyes of Jesus. Look deeply into an icon or picture of Jesus if that helps. Imagine Jesus saying to you what he said to Nathanael – I saw you when . . . Give thanks that you live every moment of your life under his loving gaze.

And second, use the eyes of Jesus to look at people around you, especially the people no one else looks at. See them, not through stereotypes or preconceived ideas or media portrayals but through love, the same eyes of love with which Jesus sees them.

When we do this, when we see as Jesus sees, holiness erupts all around. And we truly do see the heavens opened and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Amen.

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