

SERMON: Greater Things
TEXT: John 1:43-51

1-17-21

I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together; to pray together; to struggle together,... to stand up for freedom together; knowing that we will be free one day.

If you haven't realized it yet, this is an excerpt of one of the most famous speeches in history, given by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the March on Washington in 1963. With everything that is going on in our country, I almost forgot that tomorrow is MLK Day, commemorating Dr. King's birthday. This day must never go by unnoticed. Dr. King's dream must never be forgotten.

There was a time, however, when I was not convinced that Martin Luther King was worthy of all the honor and attention he received. I knew he was a civil rights leader and had a famous speech and did a great deal to change laws and attitudes about black people in America. I knew just the basics. But I had also learned somewhere that he had not always been faithful to his wife. So I honed in on that one detail of his life and decided that was all that mattered. A great public figure, yes, but on the homefront he certainly wasn't perfect.

As the years went by, I learned more about his life and his work. I learned from MLK Day events. From articles and documentaries and sermons. I learned from people who were at the March on Washington. I learned from pastors who lost their churches because they supported his work. I learned from black people how critical his work was and how the struggle for equality continues. And I read his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

I read it again just the other day. And I was stunned at how apt it is for the state of our country today. Listen to another excerpt:

In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of

bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

Indeed, he was a great man, with a great message, who did great work, and made a great sacrifice. No, he wasn't perfect. Who among us is? Martin Luther King does deserve to be remembered and honored, and I regret judging him based on just one aspect of his life.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus went to Galilee and found Philip, calling him with the words, "Follow me." Philip then found his friend 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." Nathanael was immediately skeptical, saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But Philip invited him, "Come and see."

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael was about to make a judgment about Jesus based on that one fact about him; his hometown. You might be wondering, what's wrong with Nazareth? Biblical scholars explain that

Nazareth was simply insignificant. Nobody special came from Nazareth. No prophets pointed to Nazareth as the place the Messiah might come from. So Nathanael has very low expectations of this person Philip is raving about. Before he even meets Jesus, Nathanael has decided that he's nothing special.

I imagine Philip like an excited child, grabbing Nathanael by the arm and pulling him along as he runs. "Come and see! Come and see! Come and see!"

Jesus, upon seeing Nathanael come toward him, has a judgment of his own: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Of course, Jesus, as a divine being, really does know Nathanael. He knew that Nathanael was sitting under a fig tree when Philip found him. He knows everything about him. In fact, it's likely that Jesus knows him better than Nathanael knows himself. Jesus knows Nathanael's heart. As John described at the beginning of Chapter 1, Jesus is the "true light which enlightens everyone." And Jesus *sees* the true light in everyone.

Nathanael knew immediately that his assumption that nothing good comes out of Nazareth was inaccurate. His judgment of Jesus was unfair. Just as my judgment of Martin Luther King, Jr. was unfair. Just as our extremism and dismissal and judgment of those who disagree with us is unfair.

It has bothered me for a long time that “friends” on Facebook comment about how they are unfriending people who disagree with them, usually on political issues. Our commitment to our party or our values has become more important than our commitment to people. To relationships. To listening and learning about each other. Your vote has become more important to me than your story. Just because my neighbor has a sign in her yard supporting a republican and I have a sign in my yard for a democrat, we must not assume that we can't be good neighbors.

Because Jesus shows complete knowledge and understanding of him, Nathanael now proclaims his belief in Jesus as “the Son of God and the King of Israel.” Jesus responds, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”

GREATER THINGS. Nathanael and Philip and all the others who answer the call to follow Jesus will indeed experience greater things. They will see Jesus feed thousands of people with five loaves of bread and two fishes. They will witness his genuine love, his healing power, and his ability to raise the dead, as he resurrected his friend, Lazarus. They will feel his great compassion, mercy, and grace, as he asks God to forgive those who have crucified him. They will hear

difficult truths spoken in love, as he spares a woman from being stoned to death for adultery, but tells her to “go and sin no more.”

In the past year of “unprecedented” events, piled up one after another, and most of them negative, we are all hungry and thirsty for the unprecedented and never to be matched GREATER THINGS of Jesus.

I am part of a group that was nearly destroyed this week because one member made a public statement of his assumption that anyone who continues to support the current president is also supportive of the violent attack on the Capitol. This group is not about politics. Members share a common purpose. They are colleagues, neighbors, and friends. At least, they were. Until one of them said, in essence, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Our love of God comes from learning about God and being in relationship with God. Our love of Jesus comes from realizing that he knows everything about us and loves us anyway, and calls us to follow him. Our love of neighbor comes from a desire to know our neighbor and to work together on common goals. Jesus calls us to listen to each other’s stories. To learn about where the other comes from, how she was raised, the struggles he has endured.

Beloved of God, there are GREATER THINGS than politics. Jesus calls us all to follow as he demonstrates how to live and love as he lived and as he loves us.

May we open our hearts to the GREATER THINGS that Jesus has in store for us. And may we follow him throughout our lives... to the glory of God!

AMEN.