

A Spirit Person
John 1:43-51

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We have an interesting passage from scripture for our sermon this morning. It falls at the end of the first chapter of the Gospel of John. You might remember, unlike Matthew and Luke, John does not tell about Jesus' birth. Instead, John begins his Gospel by speaking about Jesus as the Word of God, or Logos of God: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." With this opening sentence, John establishes Jesus as a spirit person who comes from God. By the end of the first chapter, where we find our scripture, Jesus is in the process of calling his disciples.

Our passage begins with Jesus calling Philip. Philip then finds his friend, Nathanael, and tells him that they have found the one whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote and he is Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth. Then, in a rather strange comment, Nathanael says: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Philip invites him to come and see so Nathanael goes and says: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" He then asks Jesus how he knew him. Jesus answered that he saw him under a fig tree before Philip called to him. Nathanael replies: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!" Then Jesus says: "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And our text ends by Jesus stating: "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

So, like the beginning of the Gospel, the first chapter ends by announcing that Jesus is a person sent from God that is so important that heaven will open and angels will ascend and descend upon him. In other words, we are to pay attention. Jesus is something special. Jesus is connected to God in an everlasting way, so we need to listen. As the late theologian Marcus Borg said, Jesus is a spirit person and everything that he lived for flowed from his experience of being intertwined with God's Spirit. Jesus is a prophet, an activist, a healer, a teacher because he is led by God's Spirit.

By the end of the Gospel, Jesus gives this Spirit as an Advocate and guide for all those who follow in his footsteps. We know from history that some of these people are prophets and social activists, some are teachers, some are spiritual guides, and most are folk like you and me.

Today we remember the 20th century activist and prophet Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a child growing up in New Haven in the 1960's my life was shaped by the vision of Dr. King. I remember being 5 years old and sitting in my parent's bedroom in front of their small black and white T.V. My mother was sewing and we were watching the Freedom March on Washington. It was August of 1963. I have a clearer memory of my friend Sumner Parker calling me on the night of April 4, 1968 to tell me that King had been shot. Sumner's father, a lawyer, had been a Freedom Rider. We'd grown up together, attending school with other children whose parents were preachers and deeply involved in the Civil Rights movement. I remember going downstairs to the kitchen to tell my parent's that King had been shot. I can still hear my father say: "That just can't be true!" It was a deeply troubling time.

It wasn't until I was a little older when I began to study King's words and learn about his history. It was interesting to learn that some of this dream was formed by his time in Connecticut as a young man. He traveled north in the summer of 1944 with some classmates and teachers to work in the tobacco fields in Simsbury. He wrote home about being amazed that he could eat at a nice restaurant with white people and go to the same movies. He wrote about attending church with white people and teaching Sunday school to 107 other young men. Some years ago, a woman from Simsbury told me that one day he was singing in the basement of the Simsbury Congregational Church and the choir director went racing down the stairs to find out who had such a beautiful voice and recruit him for the choir. In his autobiography, King wrote that after the summer in CT he could never adjust to the segregation laws of the south because the idea of separation did something to his dignity and self-respect.¹

It is clear that Dr. King was a spirit person with prophetic powers. Steeped in scripture, preaching, and the great African American spiritual tradition, King had a way of speaking that touches our hearts to this day. His "I Have a Dream" speech never loses its prophetic power:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.²

¹ King Jr, Martin Luther. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*

² King Jr, Martin Luther. *I Have a Dream Speech.* 1963.

Part of this dream has come true. Changes have been made but we still live in a society that spews hateful words at each other and points out of differences rather than our common humanity. It is a society not all that different from the one Jesus entered 2000 years ago and his message is as clear for us today as it was 60 years ago and 600 years ago.

Each of us is invited to be a person filled with the power of God's gracious Spirit. We are invited to be a part of God's dream of loving the world. We are invited to pay attention to how the Spirit moves in our own lives and nudges us to be faithful each day. This is what Jesus came to show to us - to be people of the Way of the Spirit.

If we are confused as to how we can be a spirit person, we can use the Prayer of St. Francis - another Spirit person - as guide for our lives: It is simple and easy to memorize. If you can memorize 4 phone numbers you can memorize this prayer. Use it as a guide everyday as you wait on hold for a doctor's office, or seek patience while working with a child or co-worker, or feel discouraged by the daily news.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

The prayer is a great little reminder that we don't live out our lives alone - but rather in the great benevolence of God - the God who calls prophets and the God who calls every day folk like you and me to be voices of kindness in our very troubled world.

This is the dream of God. That we will all one day be Spirit people - people of peace - people of hope - people of love - people of light - people of joy.

May God be with us on the journey. Amen.

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