

Message for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year B (1/17/2021)
John 1:43-51

Amid the mounting tension in Washington, D.C., these past weeks and the corresponding uncertainty surrounding the state of our democracy, I'm reminded that we're supposed to be celebrating the life of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. this weekend. What would he think of all that's happened, I wonder? If he were alive today, he might be in Washington this week, too, although for very different reasons than others who've swarmed there, some to foment insurrection and some to put it down.

If he were there, King would already know the territory. The speech he delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial was the highlight of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, an event that signified swelling support for the Civil Rights movement in a time leading up to decisive victories – the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

"We've come to our nation's capital to cash a check," he proclaimed to a sea of listeners.

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all [people] would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the [Black community] a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there

are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.¹

Today, King and his coconspirators are heroes. But during his lifetime, and especially as the movement for civil and human rights advanced, he faced significant resistance. In spite of the quarter-million supporters who showed up to the March on Washington, 60% of Americans disapproved of it, about the same percentage of voters who held an “unfavorable view” of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2017.² Of course, opposition to Civil Rights was often violent, both publicly and privately. King and his family received death threats consistently for years before someone finally made good on them and murdered him on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4th, 1968.

What a price to pay for faithfulness. How discouraging it must have been to struggle against the tide all those years; how frightening to repeatedly risk life and limb for the sake of a better life. What do you suppose was the source of his courage? What steeled his conviction?

Although we think of Dr. King as a man of deep faith, his enduring faithfulness emerged from a moment of deep despair, “the kitchen experience,” as he would come to call it. By January 1956, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was in full swing, and as a key leader King felt a crushing burden of responsibility. Late one night, he answered the telephone to hear yet another hate-filled voice

¹ *A Testament of Hope*, Ed. James M. Washington, 217.

² www.complex.com/life/2018/01/martin-luther-king-not-popular-public-opinion-black-lives-matter.

breathing threats. Hanging up, he resigned himself to a sleepless night, made a cup of coffee, and sat down at his kitchen table, despondent. “I was ready to give up,” he later recalled.

With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory: “I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength or courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.³

The living God met Martin Luther King, Jr. with the promise of a future at the very moment that he could not imagine a future of his own making. God was powerfully present in the absence of any other hope, and the word of encouragement God spoke was not theoretical, but personal.

I wonder if the disciples had their own versions of a “kitchen experience” when they first met Jesus. I’m thinking particularly of Nathanael, the disciple featured in today’s Gospel from John yet who doesn’t appear in the other Gospels. His friend Philip rushes to tell him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth,” to which Nathanael replies, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” There’s no

³ As cited by Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 193.

reason to believe that Nathanael is despondent prior to discovering Jesus, but he certainly is cynical. He's quick to assign value to persons on the basis of their origins, and resistant to possibilities that might exist outside his worldview.

Philip has only his own encounter with Jesus to provide as evidence, so he invites Nathanael to encounter Jesus, too: "Come and see." To Nathanael's credit, he does, and in Jesus' presence he's moved immediately from skepticism to trust: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"⁴

I've always wondered at Jesus' magnetism. He must have radiated God's goodness in an unmistakable way, such that people trusted and followed him in spite of their doubts and fears. **"We have seen his glory," the Gospel writer of John affirms earlier in chapter one, and apparently that's enough for his disciples to go on.** That God was made known in the person of Jesus was a matter of experience: "We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Friends, God's arrival is not theoretical, but personal. The incarnate word comes near to us, too, even and especially in moments of doubt and fear and hopelessness, inviting us again and again into his ongoing story, nourishing us with his own life, and summoning us to partake in his project to love and save the world: "Follow me." So, we anticipate that sustaining presence, especially when we need it most; we cling to the promise of a future, especially where we can't see one; and we trust the one who bids us to take the next step.

⁴ Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 534.