

“Come and See”

In an astonishingly self-revealing sermon, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reflected on the most important event of his life. It came on January 27, 1956, during the second month of the Montgomery bus boycott. King was in the midst of a sleepless night, worrying about threats that had been made on his life and the lives of his wife and infant daughter. He was feeling shaken, frightened and alone. He wrote,

And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. Something said to me, you can't call on Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on Mama now. You've got to call on something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.

And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself.

It wasn't that King was a stranger to religion; quite the contrary was true. He said,

Now of course I was religious, I grew up in the church. I'm the son of a preacher... my grandfather was a preacher, my great grandfather was a preacher, my only brother was a preacher, my daddy's brother is a preacher, so I didn't have much choice, I guess. But I had grown up in the church, and the church meant something very real to me, but it was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must... if you're going to walk the lonely paths of this life.

Clearly at this moment he was on such a lonely path. Sitting at his kitchen table in the middle of the night, he hunched over his coffee cup, bowed his head and prayed. He said, “Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage.”

And then he felt a presence:

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’ I heard the voice of Jesus telling me to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.¹

¹ From “Reflections” in *The Strength to Love*, as cited in *Bearing the Cross*, by David J. Garrow. New York: Random House, 1986. Vintage Books edition, pp.57-58.

Throughout his life, King would return to the memory of that experience when he needed to be renewed in what we in the United Church of Christ call God's gift of "courage in the struggle for justice and peace."

We tend to think of King—at least I do—as someone who had perfect clarity and unshakable vision. He was certainly accomplished as a theologian. Through his study of Gandhi he had come to an understanding of how the Sermon on the Mount might be lived out through the principles of non-violent resistance. Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman had shaped his thinking about God.² But theological principles and abstract ideas were not enough to sustain him. He needed the reality of a living relationship with God which, for Christians, comes through Jesus Christ. He couldn't just live from the faith of others. He had to find a faith for himself. In the terminology of the Gospel According to John, he had to "come and see."

To be sure, John also starts out with theological abstractions: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."(1:1) But the central assertion of John is that "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory..." (1:14) This seeing begins with the witness of others. But then we have to come and see for ourselves.

There is a long succession of witnesses in the Gospel According to John. John the Baptist is the first. He has been baptizing in the Jordan River. He has told religious officials from Jerusalem that he himself is not the Messiah. He has been sent to prepare the way. But the moment he sees Jesus he proclaims, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

"The Lamb of God" is a richly symbolic image, but it is just one of many in John. In the first chapter alone eight different titles for Jesus are employed. It is almost as though each person who encounters him has a different image, most of them deeply rooted in the expectations of Israel: "Lamb of God," "Son of God," "Rabbi," "Messiah," "King of Israel" and "Son of Man" among the rest. Far from exhaustive, these titles are merely suggestive, and will be joined by a host of images Jesus employs with reference to himself, such as "living water," "the bread of life," "the light of the world," "the way, the truth and the life," "the Good Shepherd," "the true vine," and so on. The point of all these different images seems to be that no one term, expression or title can contain the reality of Jesus; and the hoped-for result is that one or another of them will so captivate those who hear or read them that the hearer or the reader will be moved to "come and see."

That's the way it works with Jesus' first two followers, one of whom is Andrew, brother of Simon. These two had been followers of John. But John points to Jesus and says for the second time, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" They follow Jesus, who turns and speak the first words he utters in the Gospel of John: "What are you looking for?"

Usually it's Jesus who answers a question with a question, but in this instance it's the prospective disciples who respond, "Where are you staying?" As is so often the case in John's Gospel, the question can be taken on more than one level. The word "staying" is the same word the Gospel has employed earlier in announcing that "the Word became

² King's doctoral thesis was written on Tillich and Wieman.

flesh and *lived* among us.” It will later be used to describe how Jesus’ followers are to *live* in him.” Nothing is simple in John. But in asking where Jesus *lives*, they are asking what it means to be with him. And that is a key question.

And Jesus answers, “Come and see.” He isn’t saying, “Come see my awesome crib with my huge TV and twelve car garage.” He is saying that the only way really to come to know who he is, is to follow him.

John the Baptist got these first disciples only so far. He pointed. Reading the Gospel of John will take you only so far. As the author says in chapter twenty, this book is written “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing may have life in his name.” (20:30)

Ah, but translation falls short again. It isn’t just believing *that* Jesus is something or other; it is believing *in* Jesus: trusting in him, giving ourselves over to serving him. Hearing witnesses and reading stories and listening to sermons can take us only so far. We have to come and see. We all do.

Like Martin Luther King, Jr., I grew up around religion. My family went to church all the time. I also was interested in ways of thinking about God. As a philosophy major in college and later as a student in seminary I could get pretty excited about theology, what Henri Nouwen used to call, “the clever manipulation of godly ideas.” But knowing about God is a far cry from knowing God. It’s one thing to take the head trip, and another thing altogether to, in King’s words again, “walk the lonely paths of this life.”

Like King, I found myself at a time of personal crisis; only mine took the form of a disastrous first marriage. I got into it through the self-important delusion that I could make somebody else happy, that I could pull somebody else’s crumbling world together and make everything all right, and in the process make my own life worthwhile. In trying to hold together the fantasy world in which I was living, I was trying to be somebody other than who I was. I had to admit my mistake. I had to admit my failure. I had to pray for strength and courage and help first to know the truth, and then to do the right thing. It was almost too much to face. I thought about killing myself, planned how I would do it. I was pretty pathetic and desperate. I needed a way where there was no way.

It’s a long story, longer than this sermon. But the essence of it is that once I admitted this deep and painful truth, I no longer had anything to run away from. I began to feel a tremendous sense of freedom. I felt the possibility at least of forgiveness. I had a new beginning. And I was no longer afraid to be who I was, because I knew that the forgiveness and love I had found were things the world could not take away from me.

I remember vividly one later afternoon when I was preparing to lead a Bible study on Romans, and I came across the part where Paul says that, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” And suddenly I realized that my life was being described. This message about God’s forgiveness wasn’t just a theological abstraction. It was a gift and a promise to me. How did King put it? “He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No, never alone.”

That was a beginning. But it was only a beginning. Since those days, in my walk with him Jesus has been many, many different things: moral teacher, caring friend and guide. In him I have felt my life judged and called to account. In him I have found forgiveness and new life. In him I have discovered God's laughter, which I lose whenever I take myself too seriously. In him I find direction, meaning purpose and joy. In him I find community with others who seek to serve him. In him, and in someone else who loves him more than life, I have found grace to keep a second marriage going for more than thirty years.

But that's just me. There are so many stories here in this room, and we tell them in so many different ways. Every life is a story. Come and see.

Whenever we take the first halting steps toward new life we find that we have a companion on the journey, one who will never leave us alone. It is a journey toward deeper truth. It is a journey toward a yearning for justice. It is a journey of faith. It is a journey that lasts a lifetime and more.

But ultimately you can't take my word for it... or King's... or John's... or anybody else's. Come and see. Come and see.

Amen

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