

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon 1.25.15

Scripture: Mark 1:14-20

John 1:35-46

I saw the movie *Selma* earlier this week, on Monday in fact, with the boys—a fitting way, it seemed to me, to honor Martin Luther King Day. It focused on the marches staged from Selma to Montgomery in protest of poll taxes, literacy tests, and other obstructions—some quite terrorizing obstructions—to full enfranchisement of black American voters.

In 1963, in Dallas County, Alabama, the seat of which was Selma, less than 1% of 15,000 African-American adults were registered to vote: only 130 out 15,000. This, in a place where black citizens comprised 57% of the adult population; this, in a place where black voters would comprise a majority.

No doubt, this was the problem, right? (It's easy to be smug here in the northeast, where the numbers, still today, favor the white establishment. Toby asked me, if I had lived then, would I be on the side of black people? That's the trouble with history, I said. I can only hope, but I can't know.)

The Dallas County Voters' League and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee worked to register people; they organized groups to come to city hall; they raised consciousness among the would-be electorate that this would be a key to black empowerment. But their work was slow to bring change. With every step forward, there was a violent push back. Economic retaliation; threats from the KKK; a church bombing that killed four children, four girls: the white establishment was not going to give up its power and control. Incredibly to my mind, "in the summer of 1964, local Judge James Hare barred any gathering of three or more people under sponsorship of SNCC, SCLC, or DCVL; or with the involvement of 41 named civil rights leaders." This, in spite of the constitutionally guaranteed right of the people peaceably to assemble.

First amendment, people.

But early in 1965, Martin Luther King spoke at a gathering in Selma, local leaders having invited him to do so. The Montgomery Bus Boycotts under King's leadership had been successful, non-violence was proving powerful, and having a

nationally recognized front man would gain the protest needed national attention. And now, in Selma, these leaders had in mind a protest march from Selma to Montgomery, a 54-mile journey that they were expressly prohibited from having.

So said the local authorities—the police, the courts. But the national authorities, now with the Civil Rights’ Act made law, would have a different take.

Getting Dr. King involved worked; the march (which became marches, three marches) worked—if painfully, indeed at great cost. People were beaten as they attempted to cross that bridge—the Edmund Pettus Bridge between Selma and Montgomery. Some were gassed, others whipped; a few were murdered as, over those six weeks, the protest movement kept returning to the Edmund Pettus bridge. But it worked. It gained national attention. It gained widespread sympathy. It moved the public thinking so to move the president, Lyndon Johnson, to sign into law the Voting Rights Act.

The movie likewise works. There’s been criticism that Johnson suffers inaccurate—and unfair—treatment. But I don’t think he comes across as a villain, just a politician who had several priorities, just a white man who believed poverty was a more pressing social problem than racism.

Likewise, I don’t think King comes across as a hero, just a man whom history put in exactly the right place, just a black Christian preacher-man who believed what he preached, and who followed where history and the people (and the Holy Spirit) called him, though he recognized what it would cost him.

Ryan Cooper of *The Week* goes deeper with this in an article on leadership as portrayed in the movie: “The way *Selma* treats the principal political actors of the story, King and President Lyndon Johnson, results in a nuanced and badly needed portrait of leadership – ironically, by taking some of the heroic shine off both figures.” Unlike in so many popular depictions of leadership, in which one man acts alone to save the city or his family or society or the whole world, in *Selma* leaders are only as powerful as the people who back them, spur them, encourage them, witness to them.

King, for his part in the movie, “...comes off as a hugely impressive person,” Cooper acknowledges. But “he’s not shown as omnipotent or even terribly sure of

himself. He is clearly afraid for his life, justifiably so. The crushing pressure repeatedly gets to him, and the reassurance of lieutenants and friends is necessary to keep his spirits up.

“The murders of activist Jimmie Lee Jackson and the white clergyman James Reeb tear at King’s heart and conscience, and he finds it difficult to proceed. He stops the second attempt at a march from Selma to Montgomery on the Edmund Pettis Bridge, afraid it is a trap. In a late-night drive, he tells John Lewis he is going to cancel the planned following march, but Lewis talks him out of it.”

What Cooper doesn’t point out is that Lewis talks King out of canceling the march by quoting back to King King’s own words. Lewis, a younger man than King, remembers a worship service he attended as a boy where King was the preacher. “We’ve come too far to turn back now,” Lewis remembers King to have preached.

“We’ve come too far to turn back now.” He says those words back to him—back to this man who had indeed just turned back a march, turned the people he was leading ahead now in retreat for fear of what terror awaited them had they continued across that bridge: across to where police awaited and recently deputized white men awaited (with Billy clubs, with teargas, with whips on horse-back); across to where King feared the marchers would be cut off from their good-will supporters who brought them sandwiches, water, bedrolls and blankets for their roadside overnights. King had led them to turn back, and now he hears this: “We’ve come too far to turn back now.”

King spoke them once. And he hears them now. And they renew his courage and conviction that, though this would be costly—costly not just to him, but to many in the movement, costing some even their lives—there was no retreat. The people would follow King, though freely choosing the risk, so King had to lead: this was his duty. They would be behind him if he would be out front.

I don’t know if this exchange is true to history. I don’t know, at least not yet. I haven’t read John Lewis’ autobiography, a two-part graphic novel that I do intend to read. But, if it did happen exactly as portrayed, then I wonder if Lewis knew himself to be alluding to scripture; and if it didn’t happen exactly as portrayed, then I wonder if the screenwriter knew himself to be alluding to scripture.

Jesus called disciples; he *gathered* disciples. This we know. Of course, the manner by which he called his disciples is open for debate. Each of the gospels narratives remembers it a bit differently, and during each season of Epiphany we hear two versions—during Year A, we hear the 1st part of John’s version, and then Matthew’s; during Year B, we hear the middle part of John’s version, and then Mark’s; and during Year C, we hear the last part of John’s version, and then Luke’s. John is wordy so his telling of Jesus’ calling disciples to “Come and see,” is long enough to stretch over three tellings; and the synoptic gospels share enough in common so each has a version to contribute to the season of Epiphany over the three-year lectionary cycle.

Last Sunday was the second Sunday after the Epiphany, which means the gospel reading (which we didn’t hear because of Godly Play Sunday) was John’s version of Jesus’ call. Today is the third Sunday after the Epiphany, which means the gospel reading is Mark’s version. Epiphany is the season when we come to see Jesus anew, when we recognize in Jesus what God meant and means to reveal. Something is laid bare and made clear; suddenly, we see.

In Jesus’ having called disciples, what are we to see?

There’s a strong impulse that would have us insist that Jesus has it all well in hand, that Jesus has little need of us. There’s a strong impulse that would have us confess Jesus is Lord and Savior of all. He has little need of help. He has little need of us. Sure, he likes us. Of course, he didn’t want to be all alone. He wanted company for his journey and some help with his work. But he would do the heavy lifting; he would do the serious saving.

The depiction of the disciples so often undergirds this impulse. The disciples: they’re dense; they’re slow-witted and slow-seeing. If they sometimes get it right, they in the next moment get it utterly wrong. They forget. They misunderstand. When Jesus tells them stay awake, they fall asleep. Jesus even calls one of them, Peter, “Satan,” which is to say someone who’s a stumbling block in the way of the faithful. Given all this, it’s easy to conclude that Jesus didn’t need disciples, that it’s only the case that the disciples needed him. In order to become “fishers of men,” the disciples needed him. But it didn’t flow the other way.

The understanding of God as “almighty” also undergirds this impulse. If Jesus is God’s revelation amidst humanity, is indeed the fullness of God realized in human form, then to say Jesus needed disciples is to say something of God as one who needs—needs something of those disciples, needs something even of us. But you can’t say that. You can’t say God needs anything. He’s almighty: he’s omniscient and omnipotent and omnipresent. He’s omni-. So, you can’t say that God *needs* anything at all. Believe me: you can’t say that. I said it once, in divinity school; and I was swiftly corrected. So, you know, don’t say it.

But look, Jesus called disciples, according to Mark, “after John was arrested.” John, who was Jesus’ cousin; John, who was Jesus’ herald; John, whom Jesus followed in life because he was the one sent to prepare a way for the Lord and to preach to others that they prepare a way for the Lord: John was Jesus’ inspiration and guide, his strength and stay. Yes, Jesus was filled with Holy Spirit, but he moved through life with John—in common with him, in distinction from him. John, I always say, surfaces in the gospel narratives like a driving undercurrent in Jesus’ life. He’s a given. And then he wasn’t there. Arrested, imprisoned, executed: the way of John had always been the way of Jesus; so it was quite likely that, arrested, imprisoned, executed, the way of John would continue to be the way of Jesus.

If ever there were a time to turn back, it would be now. So it was now that Jesus gathered disciples. Coincidence? Coincidence that Jesus first called disciples according to Mark “after John was arrested?” I don’t think so. I think in John’s arrest Jesus recognized what was at stake, felt grievous loss, and needed renewed strength for the journey that lay ahead.

John’s gospel call of the disciples says much the same thing but in very different language and circumstance. John hasn’t been arrested, is indeed still at the river baptizing whomever comes out to him; and when he notices Jesus he exclaims, “Look! Here is the Lamb of God.” This alone is enough to turn the two disciples of John who were with him, to turn them now to follow Jesus.

Jesus notices this move, of course; and of it, he asks, “What are you looking for?”

Their answer is a question, and an odd one at that: “Where are you staying?”

“What are you looking for?” “Where you are staying.” But why should they want to know that?

Because John wants us to know that. John’s gospel is primarily concerned with his readers understanding that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is God’s Son and Messiah. So, this notion of where Jesus is staying is a prominent one in John’s gospel. *Meno* is the Greek word; it translates “abide,” “dwell,” “stay;” and it indicates the abiding of Jesus in God, the abiding of God in Jesus, the abiding of the Spirit amidst the disciples once given the breath of the Spirit, and the abiding of the disciples in Jesus that they might abide in God.

The implications of this aren’t merely creedal. In spite of the fact that so much contemporary Christianity makes such heavy use of John’s gospel and its insistence that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus and none other is the Son of God, that Jesus is the Way and the Truth and the Life, is indeed the only way to the Father: in spite of the fact that the whole evangelical wing of the Western Church foreswears by this as a matter of doctrine and orthodoxy, what John was hoping for his readers to recognize is that the way of God is the way of Jesus. Yes, John’s concern was less that his readers recognize Jesus as God-like and more that they—that we—recognize that God is Jesus-like.

John wanted us to know that, whenever someone proclaims God as vengeful and violent, they’re proclaiming something untrue about God. John wanted us to know that, whenever God is confessed as warring and dealing in death, our confession is false. God does not act out; God takes in. God does not defend and deflect, God accepts and suffers for our sake. To say anything of God that does not comport with the way Jesus was in the world is to blaspheme.

It’s funny. I know a lot of people who say they have no problem with God, it’s Jesus they don’t like. And it always makes me wonder, have you met Jesus? Because Jesus, according the gospels, was really nice. He spoke some harsh words: he had no patience for those who abuse their power, and he had no patience for the world having fallen into enemy hands. But overall, Jesus is a profoundly, compelling kind person. It’s God who’s problematic. God turned a woman into salt. God flooded the world, destroying everything. Then Jesus came along and begged the question, are

you so sure those things were of God? Because this is what God looks like: this is who God is and how God behaves: a self-giving servant on the cross for the sake of peace.

This is what we're to come and see. This is what those first disciples according to John were to come and see: that God is Jesus-like, self-emptying, self-giving; and that this is good news—good news to all except perhaps to Christ who would be the one so to self-give and suffer for our sake.

“Come and see.” It would be said four times in this gospel.

The first is when Jesus says it to these two men who would become Jesus' first disciples.

The next is just a day later, when Philip confronts Nathanael's bigotry about where good people are and aren't to be found. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael asked—ironically or sarcastically, or perhaps full of conviction. (“Can anything good come out of Riker's Island?” “Can anything good come out of Wasilla, Alaska?”) “Come and see,” is Philip's answer. Come and see what God is like, because it's not what you apparently think.

The third takes the invitation even further afield—into Samaria; and it comes forth from an even unlikelier source—a woman, unmarried, unclean, alone at the village well in the heat of the day. Jesus received water from her, because he was thirsty; and he offered water to her, living water that she might never again thirst. Then she ran to the villagers and proclaimed to them, “Come and see someone who has told me everything I've ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

The fourth and final time it comes back to Jesus, full circle, this invitation to knowing God as the Lamb that we would sacrifice, to knowing God as self-giving, self-sacrificing. “Come and see,” is what Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha, say to Jesus when he asks of his friend, recently deceased, now buried: “Where have you laid him?” This is John's Gethsemane scene. This is John's version of Jesus' recognition that his ministry was coming to completion, his passion and glory are what now awaited. Raising Lazarus would attract the dread attention of the authorities. Raising Lazarus would provoke the punishing powers to act. Freeing Lazarus from death would amount to Jesus' offering himself to death instead.

“Where have you laid him?”

“Come and see.”

And at this, Jesus wept.

“Why?” goes the question. “Why did he weep?” Because he missed his friend who died. Because he failed his friend who died. Because he was angry at the power of death or at the people’s yet believing in the power of death. These are some of the posited answers. I think it’s simpler than that. I think Jesus wept because the invitation to know God as God truly is has come full circle, has come back to its origin; so now Jesus’ life is complete, and his death is demanded—yet not by God but as the Lamb of God which God sacrificed, gave to us.

When the word is preached back to Jesus by those who would follow Jesus, he knows there’s no retreat. He’s come too far to turn back now. What waits on the other side of the bridge that he must cross—freedom, empowerment, a fullness of life for all people—will make the dread journey worth it. But it comes at a cost, a fearsome cost.

I imagine Jesus recognized this, and recognized this too: that he could only be out front if he had the likes of us behind him, the disciples, the apostles, the Church. The disciples who were called to be students of Christ, the apostles who were sent out in Christ’s name, the Church that is to be the beloved community by which the continued reality of the Living Christ is revealed in the world that anyone out there might see us and know: There love is lived, there love wins.

It may be theologically sound to say that God doesn’t need our help, that Christ doesn’t need our help. But it’s anthropologically absurd—and counterproductive. It gives us too easy an out.

Yes, of course, wouldn’t it have been great if Martin Luther King could have redeemed all our social sins? Wouldn’t it be great if honoring King with a holiday could have the magical effect of redeeming us of our racism? Wouldn’t it be great if Jesus’ self-giving made it so none of us had so to self-give again?

I mean, if we decide to follow in Christ’s way in the faith that by this the world will be saved—by forgiveness for the sake of peace that all might have life and have it in abundance now and forever; if we live in the way that Christ leads so to build up the Kingdom in our midst, then what are we saying about Christ, about God? That

they need our help, that they need our faithfulness to the Word and the Way, that they—this triune God—needs *us*? Is that what we're saying?

Is that we're doing? With God's help, it just might be.

Thanks be to God.