

Sunday, January 22, 2017  
All Saints Episcopal Church  
San Leandro, California  
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon

Last Sunday we commemorated the Feast of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and ever since then I have found myself immersed in Reverend King's writing. He was quite a moving preacher, gifted in ways I could only aspire. Upon reflecting on today's lessons-- particularly the Epistle and Gospel readings — one quote of King's stood out above the rest. It is an excerpt from his speech entitled "The American Dream":

"All this is to simply say that all life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality; tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in the world, no man can be totally rich even if he has a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people cannot expect to live more than twenty or thirty years, no man can be totally healthy, even if he just got a clean bill of health from the finest clinic in America. Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way the world is made. I didn't make it that way, but this is the interrelated structure of reality. John Donne caught it a few centuries ago and could cry out, 'No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.' If we are to realize the American Dream we must cultivate this world perspective."

This interconnectedness is at the heart of the Christian Gospel and these words feel razor sharp cast upon the cultural, political, and social landscape of our present day. Whatever your race or age, ability or disability, sexual orientation or political persuasion, there is one future before us and we are forever inextricably linked, one to another, in a common fate. The church is spoken of as the Body of Christ-- one Body in this world of which we are all parts. Christ died for the healing and salvation of humanity-- the entirety of humanity-- and the Scriptures say that Christ gave himself "for the life of the world"-- pointing towards what is described in The Book of Acts as God's promise to bring about the "restoration of all things." We must be cognizant of this profound truth as we work towards the manifestation of what Reverend King calls The American Dream.

- As long as there is one person on our streets — which are all streets — who is starving to death, we as a nation, a people, a body will remain spiritually famished.
- As long as there is one child in our nation whose family cannot afford to give him or her a basic education, we shall all wallow in ignorance.
- As long as there is one brother or sister of mine and yours who is refused health care and dies in the ER, from lack of medicine, or from insufficient care, a spiritual infection will plague our land.
- As long as our brothers and sisters fleeing from lands of violence and conflict, seeking refuge and sanctuary in our nation, are shut out behind closed doors and rigid walls, we as a people will never enter the Kingdom of God.

- As long as people are still judged by any condition other than their character-- such as the color of their skin, their gender, or the gender of the life partner they love-- we will be shut out from the House of God, for the Scriptures say, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all the peoples."
- And as long as we ignore the groans of the earth, the impact of unsustainable industry and farming, unsustainable fishing and fracking, unsustainable mining and drilling, we will lament our shrinking place in the order and family of creation.

And so here we stand. Everyday a new dawn. And everyday we are confronted with a world in need of healing. A world of brokenness and pain. A world of sadness and sorrow. But also a world full of great beauty and wonder. A world full of possibility and potential. Today's Gospel begins at one such moment.

Today we heard from the 4th chapter of the Book of Matthew. In the 3rd chapter, Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John, his cousin. In today's account, Jesus receives news of the arrest of John the Baptist and he withdraws back to Galilee. Today's Gospel account traces Jesus' journey as he leaves Nazareth, his hometown of almost 200 people, in lower Galilee, and journeys north to Capernaum, a fishing village with a population at the time of roughly 1500. Perhaps he was disheartened; perhaps he even knew what fate awaiting John, but this led him to a new chapter of his ministry. This chapter began where John's ministry left off. Saint Matthew writes, "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" This word 'repent' in Greek is the word *metanoia* which means "change of heart and mind." It is as if he were preaching, "Change your heart and mind and ways, the Kingdom of God is near." And he begins to gather his followers, first Peter and Andrew and next James and John, all fishermen. One commentator explains:

"Jesus' act of calling disciples is a common event in the Middle East. Usually, a person with a grievance invites people to join him in resolving the grievance. We don't know Jesus' grievance, but the disciples certainly did. This in part explains why they dropped everything to follow him. In unified groups there is strength.

Moreover, this is the dry season. Farmers simply wait for the harvest. Fishing partners can leave the fishing to others for the time being. Now is the time to be out and about, to be seen and heard, to pursue group interests.

Such group orientation or connectedness permeates this reading as it does the entire Bible. The lives of the Baptizer, the disciples, and healed clients are entirely intertwined with Jesus."

I imagine what that was like for these fishermen. One moment they are casting or mending a net and the next moment, they are dropping everything to follow this itinerant rabbi. Just imagining what that was like for them makes me anxious. The unknown can be terrifying. So many possibilities — yes, potentialities of things going well, but also infinite potential for things to crash and burn. In my mind I imagine this rabbi and think, "You know, I rather like my fishing nets. I know how they work. I know where the fish are. The rhythm of this work is reassuring in its predictability. It becomes second nature. There's a security and comfort. I like my fishing

thank you very much.” And Jesus says, “Leave all that, come, follow me.” There must have been something that reassured these men who just cast their nets into the sea. The Gospeller says, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” This was their livelihood, their security. I bet they still felt a little anxious after it all sunk in; once they realized that they really did not know what they were getting into. They turn to one another and ask anxiously, “Was this the right choice?”

You know, I can relate to that feeling of anxiety. Do you ever feel anxious? Do you ever feel like you aren’t quite sure what we are getting into? Do you ever worry where it’s all going to lead; how it’s all going to unfold. To be honest, I feel there’s a contagious anxiety in the air these recent days and weeks. This drastic shift in governmental power has brought stark changes that are a wildcard . . . at best. Perhaps you are just starting off a new relationship or job or other life commitment with the entangled questions and negotiations of newness and uncertainty.

And now you are probably with me, feeling like asking, “Goodness gracious, Justin, what is the Good News in this passage to alleviate our anxieties and quell our questions, which have come to the forefront?” And here’s what all this says to me and where I find hope. The assurance I find comes in two simple words: “Follow me . . .” These are words generally spoken by someone who knows the way, but in the Gospels they are spoken by one here who is the incarnation of the way, for he says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” If I ever take you for walk on my parents’ 8 acres of woods in Michigan, I will say to you, “Follow me . . .” and show you the way through the woods. Arriving at a crowded restaurant, the host says, “Follow me . . .” and leads you to your table. In the same way, as Christ led the apostles, so too God invites us and says, “Follow me . . .” One step at a time, one foot in front of the other. This, my friends, does not mean the journey will be easy, but only that the way is possible; and if we open our hearts to *metanoia*-- the transformation of mind and spirit that comes from a life in Christ, there is a sure journey before us. And so I wish to close with a quote from Saint Francis de Sales. Hold it; meditation on it; take it to heart. “The same everlasting Father who cares for you today will care for you tomorrow and every day. Either he will shield you from suffering or give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace then and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginings.”

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