

JANUARY 18, 2009

EPIPHANY 2

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Pulpit
Exchange—St. Paul the Apostle RC, LA

&

St. Paul Lutheran, Santa Monica

“VISIONS AND DREAMS”

Isn't it remarkable that on this day on which the church commemorates the life and witness and vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as tomorrow our entire nation is asked to do, that the words preceding the beginning of today's appointed Scripture reading of the story of the boy Samuel's call are these from the First Book of Samuel chapter three, verse one:

*“In those days, the Word of God was **rare** and **visions were not widespread?**”*

In **those days**, huh? Have things really changed that much in the 3 millennia since Samuel's day? Or in the now 41 years since

brother Martin's martyrdom? Oh, we remember with nostalgia, alright, Martin's words in 1963 delivered in front of the Lincoln Memorial about his having a dream, how, as he so memorably said, "*in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream . . . a dream,*" he claimed, that is "*deeply rooted in the American dream...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.*"

Well, dream on, Martin, we're used to sighing each MLK Jr. Sunday, as racism continues to raise its ugly head, what's been called "America's original sin." But this year of 2009 is just a bit different, isn't it, when despite our party affiliations the words of Brother Martin's dream seem not quite so remote and utopian as they once did, as we anticipate with hope the inauguration of a new president amid a time of crisis on so

many fronts--this a president who shares not only Brother Martin's faith and vision and rhetorical gifts but the very color of his skin and sense of identity with people of color and especially African Americans—that has served as a marker dividing Americans for some 400 years now. Isn't it a remarkable coincidence that Barack Hussein Obama will be inaugurated, God-willing, the day after MLK Jr. Day?

Brother Martin's dream was one that he claimed, of course, was inspired by God's Word and rooted in the Scriptures—and even though 41 years after Martin's assassination--which occurred, by the way, just a month before my graduation from college in the spring of 1968, which along with Bobby Kennedy's assassination a couple of months later just a few miles from here at the Ambassador Hotel, helping to deepen an apocalyptic mood in our national political life that for me has never quite passed--Martin's dream has become a part

of the American dream—however unfulfilled it may yet be—and, in fact, a part of the “vision” of what our nation sees its calling to be, however far short of making that vision reality we continue to find ourselves.

Visions, you see, authentic God-given visions—**epiphanies** we might call them--are a double-edged gift from God. Because seeing things as they really are meant to be, casts a whole new light on things as we now experience them and are used to seeing them. For some of us, like Nathaniel of our Gospel reading, it may be difficult to set aside our world-weary cynicism which we like to call “being realistic.” “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” Nathaniel **sneers** in response to his excitable friend Philip’s news, bubbling over with enthusiasm: “We’ve found the One about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathaniel’s snide response is

perhaps the most cutting put-down in all of scripture, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*”

Sometimes I know I find myself behaving like Nathaniel, as a new idea or a fresh insight is shared with me. Oh, I’m a sensitive enough person—a pastor after all—who knows enough not to simply pour cold water on another person’s enthusiasm, or to make fun of their vision. I’m rarely as blunt as Nathaniel. But I’m afraid that too often, I’m just as dismissive and skeptical in my own way. The older I get, I fear, the more easily I assume that I’ve seen it all, we’ve tried that before, what’s the use? I find myself as enslaved as anyone to that old dogma of the church’s seven last words: “We’ve never done it that way before!” or it’s corollary “Oh, we tried that once!”

But our Gospel story doesn’t end, I hope you noticed, with Nathaniel’s snide dismissal. I think Philip’s reply is instructive and illuminating for us—even a

kind of “epiphany” for us as to how we might respond to those who pour cold water on our enthusiastic visions and ideas. What is Philip’s response? He simply tells his sarcastic buddy, “*Come and see.*” No evidence that he’s taken offense or taken Nathaniel’s slur personally. He doesn’t feel the need to get mad or get even. The casualness of his response I find astounding. Philip says simply, “Oh—just come and see.”

That, I think, is in essence, what evangelism is all about, as we’ll also hear in next week’s story of the calling of the disciples away from their fishnets. Proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ is really just a matter of a casual word-of-mouth invitation to another person—especially a person you care about—to “come and see.” Come and see for yourself who this Jesus is and what he’s all about.

That's what we the church essentially are, you see, we who've been washed in the waters of baptism, as we remembered last week. We're not any better than other people—neither better-looking or better-behaved than anyone else, not any smarter, that's for sure. Like Jesus in his day, so in ours, we Christians may even have a sufficiently bad reputation that people carry around all kinds of prejudices about us—and all kinds of folks certainly claim to have had bad enough experiences with Christians that they can't imagine anything good coming out of the church—“recovering Christians,” they even call themselves. Arguing does no good with such folks. All we can do is say “come and see,” by which we aren't saying “come and see what a lively, intelligent, politically correct, and interesting group of people we are—a religious club that any right-minded person would be proud to belong to.” No, that's not what we're saying. We're saying “come and see” not

us—but the One in whose name we gather, at whose font we wash, at whose table we eat, and in whose name we scatter to live our daily lives in Christ-like service to the least of these in our everyday lives.

(Don't get hung up on who we are and what we look and act like. Remember Paul's words to the Corinthians, as vividly translated in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*: *“Take a good look friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of ‘the brightest and the best’ among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these ‘nobodies’ to expose the hollow pretensions of the ‘somebodies’? that makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a*

clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ.” (I Cor. 1.)

That’s what we’re called to be, not some extraordinarily impressive group of people that anyone in their right mind would want to become a part of, but simply those like the boy Samuel before us and brother Martin—and, we pray, our soon-to-be inaugurated president—who have heard God’s call and have answered in faith and enthusiasm, “Here I am—Speak for your servant is **listening**.” Amen.

(There’s a story that you may have heard before--but like many of Jesus’ stories, a good story bears repeating—that is particularly appropriate to MLK Jr. Sunday as well as more than poignant for us to hear on this Sunday before the inauguration of our first African-American president. It’s a story recounted by David Garrow in his Pulitzer Prize winning book on King entitled Bearing the Cross. The event itself occurred late one Friday evening soon after King had

arrived in Montgomery as a young pastor and had almost immediately assumed the leadership of the bus boycott movement touched off by Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of the bus. As the young pastor gained public prominence as leader of the bus boycott, he began to receive threatening phone calls, and they began to take their toll.

“I felt myself faltering and growing in fear,” King later recalled. As Garrow tells the story, just after his brief sojourn in the Montgomery jail, his first I believe, and quite an experience for an upper class preacher's son, I'm sure, Martin returned home from a boycott meeting late that Friday night. Coretta, his wife, was asleep and Martin was just about to retire himself when the phone rang and yet another caller warned him that if he was going to leave Montgomery alive, he'd better do it soon. King hung up the phone and went to bed, but found himself unable to sleep. Restless and fearful, he went to the kitchen, made

himself some coffee, and sat down at the table.

“I started thinking about many things,” he later recalled, *“the threats, the difficulties within the movement. I was ready to give up. 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. The first 25 years of my life were very comfortable years, very happy years. I didn’t have to worry about anything.... I was religious. I grew up in the church. I’m the son of a preacher.... I’d 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, and have it, if you’re going to walk the lonely path of life.”*

“It was at midnight. You can have some strange experiences at night,” he said of the threatening caller who’d rattled him so deeply. *‘Nigger, we are tired of you and*

your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house.' I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born.... She was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute.

And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I got to the point where 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 call on Mama now. You've got to call on that 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 myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I 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 I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.

Then it happened!

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 saying still 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.

“Almost at once my fears began to go,” King remembered. “My uncertainty disappeared,” he recalled as he went back to bed no longer worried about threats of bombings. And so from that “dark night of the soul” over a cup of coffee in the kitchen of his parsonage, out of that honest facing of his own utter emptiness and inadequacy and fear, emerged one who would continue to grow in stature and self-confidence as a follower of Jesus, becoming the prophetic Word-bearer to his people, to his nation, and to the whole world—including a tall, slender, bi-racial Hawaiian boy named Barry who took the epiphany, the vision, of MLK Jr. to heart and on Tuesday will be inaugurated as the _____ the president of the United States of America.)

The peace that passes understanding
keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.

