

SERMON- Epiphany 2 (B)

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~~1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20)~~ _____

John 1:43-51

Good Shepherd

January 17, 2021

~~Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17~~

OPENING:

57 years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. climbed the steps of the pulpit at St. Paul's Cathedral (London, England) and delivered a sermon to the 4000 assembled there. In doing so, King became the first black man, the first Baptist, the first non-Anglican, to ever preach at St. Paul's.

Now, as you might expect, the pulpit at St. Paul's Cathedral is an elaborate, beautiful, complex piece of architecture. St. Paul's' pulpit features a series of steps that wind their way up to a space high above the ground floor and has a beautiful wooden façade decorated with intricately carved figures.

It's an imposing environment but Martin Luther King, who was on his way to accept the Nobel Peace Prize in Norway and whose preaching could hold up anywhere, *fits* into the scene.¹

So, let's ponder that image:

as we reflect on our Gospel story,

as our civic calendar recognizes King tomorrow,

and as we continue to try to come to terms with his life and witness here today.

GENESIS:

I *thought* of King climbing the pulpit at St. Paul's because our Gospel provides an image similar to that one. At the end of our reading, Jesus makes reference to "the heavens opening and angels ascending and descending" up and down a **ladder**. Jesus is recalling, of course, the incredible story of Jacob's dream from the book of Genesis.

That vision was so remarkable that it led the Israelites, tradition says, to construct their Temple on the site of the dream.

So, where Jacob had his dream became the very spot where the Temple priests would climb up their altar and offer prayers and sacrifices, and from where prophets could hear and relay God's word.²

That spot was thus an ancient "Stairway to Heaven" a metaphorical (and physical) avenue to the divine, where God could be revealed to humanity.

¹ [Martin Luther King, Jr. climbing the pulpit of St. Paul's Cathedral \(Getty Images\)](#);

Muir, Hugh. "Martin Luther King in London, 1964: Reflections on a Landmark Visit" *The Guardian*. (December 2, 2014)

<https://www.theguardian.com/usnews/2014/dec/02/martin-luther-king-in-london-1964-reflections-on-a-landmark-visit>;

Branch, Taylor. 1999. *Pillar of Fire 1963-65*. (Volume 2 of *America in the King Years*) New York: Simon & Schuster, 539.

² Genesis 28.10-19; O'Neill, J.C. (2003) "Son of Man, Stone of Blood (John 1:51) *Novum Testamentum* (45:4) 377.

INCARNATION:

And then comes Jesus.

Jesus connects the story from Hebrew Scripture to himself.

Jesus says, “I am that bridge, I am that ladder. In my very being, you will see heaven and earth collide. So you will know God through me and my disciples will become the messengers of my word.”

Where what previously had sometimes seemed to be limited to a particular place, now that revelation, this Epiphany, is carried through Jesus’ very person.

Peter Gomes explains it this way “Jesus as the Son of Man becomes the fulfillment of (Jacob’s) vision, the means of communication between the creator and creation. Place yields to person... (so that) ‘It is no longer the place... that is important, but the person of the Son of Man.’”³

REVELATION

Now that’s all fine and good, especially for Philip and Nathanael and the disciples. But what about us?

Where’s our ladder? What about our conduit?

We construct churches to soar into the air, with steeples on top, trying to touch the heavens.

We build pulpits to lift the poor preacher up, to convey the importance of their effort to share God’s Word.

Still, is it fair to compare Martin Luther King, earthly human/ sinner and saint, with the Incarnate word?

Can King, his creatureliness in tow, ever come close to Christ on the mountain, to Christ as ladder?

Maybe, you say, Martin Luther King at St. Paul’s can reach up and touch what’s above...

but what about all the other pathetic imitations of that ladder, in other words all the other pulpits and preachers, including this one, that attempt to bear witness to Christ’s revelation?

In other words, when it’s said from the pulpit, “Come and see Jesus” ... can we trust... to climb?

³ Gomes, Peter J. 1989. “John 1:45-51.” *Interpretation* 43 (3): 285. (Inset quotation from W.D. Davies)

SIGNS

I think so, actually I know so, because Jesus says as much. In our reading, he says: “Do you believe because of the fig tree (thing)?

You will see greater things than these.”

In our story, Jesus wows Nathanael with his supernatural knowledge then... rolls his eyes at the parlor trick that he has just committed.

Jesus never privileges the historical moment of the 1st century, those who saw “Stairway to Heaven” in its prime.

In fact, he kind of downplays that experience.

Jesus does so throughout John’s Gospel, most famously with Thomas at the end of the Gospel, “Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe.”⁴

Jesus is indeed the ultimate ladder, the ladder *par excellence*, but what’s important is that that ladder is not limited to one place or person, that it instead keeps appearing all throughout space and time, with angels continuing to ascend and descend in furious motion.

The Word can then be communicated everywhere, not just when and where Jesus lived, but at all pulpits,
at St. Paul’s in London,
at Ebenezer Baptist in Atlanta, at Dexter Avenue in Montgomery,
and even at Good Shepherd, Burke.

“Can anything good come out of *those places*?”

Absolutely, Jesus refuses to let us off the hook by limiting himself.

In fact, my mental image of Jacob’s Ladder has always actually been kind of disorganized with angels coming to and fro, spilling out and all around the scene, it’s almost unruly and unkempt.

I think that with Jesus as the person in charge of it, you can’t regulate it or try to box what’s happening there in.

Consider another American preacher preaching in Merry Ol’ England, remember the Royal Wedding of Harry and Meghan?

It’s like keeping our own Bishop Curry constrained in that pulpit box.

⁴ John 20.29; other examples of this tendency: John 17.20, John 14.12, and John 6.

KING:

Back to St. Paul's Cathedral and 1964, King delivered a sermon that day that is not one of his best known, it was more scholarly and theological than the ones that we tend to learn in school.

His best-known sermon, delivered at the Lincoln Memorial the previous year in 1963, actually was almost was forgotten too.

His speech that hot August day was the *last* of a long line of speakers.

King was getting to the end of it and nobody had been moved much.

The original text included these less than memorable lines:

“go back to our communities as members of the international association for the advancement of creative dissatisfaction.”⁵

All of the sudden, Mahalia Jackson, the legendary jazz singer seated behind him, said “Tell them about the dream, give’ em the dream Martin.”

What followed there from the podium and what shone out to the audience at the mall, and into history, was something like angels ascending and descending, the dream, a vision of America and the world that was otherworldly, out of sight, unbelievable. But it also was somehow in the DNA of who we are as people of God and as citizens of this country.

That vision of a multiracial community, rooted in Scripture, enshrined in our country's documents, but so often neglected and betrayed, has that gravitational pull of a great Epiphany, a shining beacon of hope, a lodestar that attracts us and beckons us to follow a half-century later. “Follow me” is its simple command.

CONCLUSION

I know King's dream might seem really far off today, so distant that talk of ladders and epiphanies recall the passage from Samuel that: “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”⁶

But it probably seemed so in 1963, that God just did not speak any more, it probably seemed liked that to the future disciples of Jesus going about their lives,. Then they got a glimpse of the dream, they heard that gentle invitation “Come and see.” And like Jacob was like being struck on the hip by God's angel, they would walk the same, never **be** the same again.

Our job is to listen to that voice, to seek out that ladder, to hear it and to follow it, from the pulpit, in the civic square, in our homes, and in our hearts. **AMEN**

⁵ Drew Hansen “Mahalia Jackson, and King's Improvisation” *The New York Times* (Aug. 27, 2013)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/28/opinion/mahalia-jackson-and-kings-rhetorical-improvisation.html>

⁶ 1 Samuel 3.2