



The Depth of our Call

January 17, 2021: The Second Sunday After the Epiphany

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord, to whom the dark and the light are both alike: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For weeks now, I've been using a pencil I bought a few summers ago as a souvenir from the gift store on the grounds of the Martin Luther King Jr. national historic site in Atlanta. The pencil has written on it a segment from his "I Have a Dream Speech" of 1963, given at the West End of our National Mall in front of the Lincoln Memorial, which faces the Capitol Building about 2 miles east across our nation's front lawn. My pencil says: "I have 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 the content of their character."

At this moment, as far as we may have come in our attitudes towards race in the 58 years since then, I confess I feel a pall of anxiety and uncertainty around the success of our democratic enterprise. And I grieve the fissures that so deeply divide our Jesus movement. How can it be that on Capitol Hill, site of the insurrection last week, a flag with Jesus' name flew over the destructive mob, while on Mount St. Alban's, site of our National Cathedral, Bishop of Washington Marianne Budde declared in no uncertain terms that nothing that was happening under that flag was Christian?

We come up upon the holiday when we remember King's legacy and regather ourselves to work toward his vision of a just and humane democratic society: To see and celebrate our differences AND to know that each of us is precious and created in the image of God AND to seek those areas of common ground that make civil society possible.

In the midst of uncertainty and doubt, it's a time to reaffirm again, as we did last week, the call that we have as Christians to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all persons and to respect the dignity of every human being.

We heard Samuel's first call from God this morning. In the grand narrative of Scripture, Samuel is the figure who guides Israel's transition from a scattered collection of unruly tribes ruled by judges, to a more unified nation under a king. Eventually, as an adult with God's further guidance, Samuel anoints Saul, then David as kings of Israel. From this text, we immediately get a sense of the complexity of a call from God. It's perhaps ironic that it takes a so long for a boy named Samuel (which means "heard by God") who has been sleeping in the shadow of the Ark of the Covenant, and an elder whose whole adult life has been spent tending to the worship of God in the Temple at Shiloh (before the main temple in Jerusalem was constructed) it's perhaps ironic that it takes four tries to figure out that it is God who is speaking.

The selection for this morning stops here, but it turns out that the boy is being told by God to deliver some hard news to his mentor: Eli and his whole family will be punished for letting his sons run wild, taking advantage of women and other sacrilegious behavior. Sometimes a call from God is to say or do the hard, but right, thing, with an initial sense, that we do not have "what it takes" to answer that call.



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There is the famous story that King used to tell about the time he nearly quit leading the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956. He had been woken up in the night by yet another hateful, murderous phone call, threatening him and his family. Unable to get back to sleep, he sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and prayed like he had never prayed before. King describes Jesus speaking to him in that experience, telling him to stand up for righteousness, truth, and justice, promising King he would never be alone. His courage restored; King described himself as “ready to face anything.”

https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218230026/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/autobiography/chp_8.htm

Our call to maintain our commitment to our baptismal covenant is profound. And we are to exercise it however we can, as deeply as we can. I’m thinking of an image that is not far from here that symbolizes the depth of commitment that God seeks from us.

Trinity Church, Copley Square Boston was built in 1877 in the Back Bay, an area that had long been a marshy, tidal flat. That land was claimed in large part by stone from Needham. A dedicated rail line ran trains, every 45 minutes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week for three decades, from Needham to Boston, filled by men and steam shovels working round the clock, covering 450 acres of the Back Bay with at least 20 feet of gravel. The effort required nearly twice as much earth as that displaced by the Big Dig. Into that newly prepared soil, the builders of Trinity Church pounded 4500 spruce logs, 35 feet long and 1 foot wide, through the gravel and earth, into the bedrock below. Cement was poured around the top of the logs to make sure they didn’t shift.

One hundred and thirty years later, while the foundations of countless other structures built on Back Bay suffered shifting and rot, preparations to build the current geothermal heating and cooling system under the church, discovered that the foundation was as sturdy as ever, needing only minor repairs. A structural engineer working on that project said that the foundation was about twice as strong as it needed to be to support the weight of the church.

http://archive.boston.com/news/science/articles/2003/08/26/a_church_on_stilts/

That’s an image for the depth and strength of our call to be true to building the commonwealth of God for all people.

It’s not easy, but the vision we hold onto leads us forth. And there’s an image I have in mind that points toward King’s vision of love, peace, and justice.

Some of you may have seen the news item online this week. Next year, one of the largest memorials in the country dedicated to racial justice will be unveiled on the Boston Common called “The Embrace.” The monument is a 22-foot-high bronze memorial honoring the commitment of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King to racial equity. It will consist of two pairs of bronze arms, intertwined in a circle. Based on a photograph of the Rev. Dr. and Mrs. King embracing after he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, the monument will be mounted on a new plaza to be called the 1965 Freedom Rally Memorial Plaza commemorating a march the Kings led that year from Carter Playground



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in Roxbury to the Common. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/14/arts/design/hank-willis-thomas-mlk-monument-boston.html?searchResultPosition=1>

In the Gospel this morning, Jesus says to Nathanael, who has just experienced the power of being known by Jesus, “You will see greater things than these.” As we grow to know Jesus, and to be known by him, may we see, and build, this greater thing, King’s vision, where all are known by the content of their character, and treated with dignity and respect, justice and love.

Amen.