



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SEEING GREATER THINGS”

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 28:10-22; John 1:43-51

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 17, 2021
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

On this Martin Luther King, Jr., weekend, I’m not only mindful of Dr. King’s role in the Civil Rights Movement, but I’m equally impressed by his effectiveness as a Christian preacher from within that context. “I have a dream,” he said in that famous speech of his that was offered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial...“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

I have little doubt that Dr. King perceived in those words, which are deeply rooted in Isaiah chapter 40. I have little doubt that Dr. King perceived in those words not only a change that could very well be geographic in nature, but also a change of a different sort, that those mountains and the hills - the valleys and the crooked places - that they could very well be poetic expressions about people, and about the kind of substantive changes that the haughty and the lowly and everyone in between would undergo upon seeing and experiencing Jesus.

Throughout his life, Dr. King bore witness to one of the more profound gifts that God gives to his people – that is the ability to faithfully dream and to see greater things. And he was not the only one. In fact, dreams are writ large throughout the pages of the Bible. We read about one such dream just a few minutes ago. Jacob, whose name we will remember will later be changed by

God to Israel, he had a dream about a ladder, and it connected heaven and earth. And upon that ladder - that staircase, if you were – angels were ascending and descending. And when Jacob woke up, this is what he said: “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.”

Now, I don't think it is altogether surprising for us to see that Jacob was not fully aligned with God – that he was somewhat imperceptive to God's presence in his life. I dare say, if we were to ask his brother Esau, the one whose birthright and blessing had been taken -- he would probably tell us that Jacob was about as far away from God as anyone could be. It's interesting isn't it that God does not wait for Jacob to come to his senses, or even to be a person of great and significant faith before initiating that heavenly dream, which is to say that Jacob does nothing to deserve this dream. Nor is it something of his own mind, of his own fashioning, his own creativity. Not by a long shot. God is the giver of all holy dreams, and in this dream, well, God makes it abundantly clear that there is no chasm that exists between heaven and earth, the angels, God's kingdom...it's all around us.

As Christians, we affirm that God's kingdom drew especially near in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And in our New Testament Lesson this morning, Philip comes to Nathaniel, who is also known in the scriptures as Bartholomew – same disciple, and he says to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Do you remember what Nathaniel said—how he responded? He says, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Now had Philip maybe said, “We've found the one who came from Bethlehem,” well at least then there would have been more of a biblical quotable reference. What I'm saying is that it takes a little bit more exegetical work for us to find an Old Testament reference that links the Messiah to the town of Nazareth. Granted, it is the case lest God would not have shared with us from within Matthew's gospel, that while in Egypt and after Herod's death, and when God had visited him in his own dream, that quote, “Jesus went away to the district of Galilee, and there he made his hometown in Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets, might be fulfilled,” ‘He will be called Nazorene.’”

My point in sharing that little bit of history though, is so that we don't end up being too critical of Nathaniel. After all, Jesus in just a few verses will say about him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” That's high praise from the Messiah. Nathaniel wonders how Jesus could possibly know that about him; he doesn't know him; they've never met. And Jesus explains it in this way: “I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip called you.” I think it's important for us to notice here as was the case with Jacob so many years before, God in Christ was seeking Nathaniel out and not the other way around. It is Jesus who sees him and knows him, and he will soon reveal to him something extraordinary about heaven and earth.

Nathaniel was amazed that Jesus knew him before they met, and he says, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” to which Jesus responds, “Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” It's as if Jesus were saying to him, “Nathaniel, you ain't seen nothing yet!” Jesus tells him what he will see; he tells him of an ancient dream, the dream that Jacob first had: “Very truly,” Jesus says, “you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Now

when Jesus says that, he is essentially telling Nathaniel that this “Jacob's dream” about a ladder, that ladder is Jesus, that Jesus himself is the incarnation of that staircase which allows God's glory to come to us, in which provides an opportunity for us to gain access to the very throne of grace. And so it happens that to see these greater things for Nathaniel, to see God's greatest revelation, it's going to come by virtue of witnessing the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It stands to reason then that our finest dreams, our holy dreams, those visions that would be for us and for the world a blessing, that they would also begin with Christ, which is also to say that they cannot begin with us. We cannot hope to see God's Son and understand how God sees and understands and engages the world if we remain focused on our message, and on our own unique set of circumstances. For Jacob and Nathaniel and for all of God's children, if any dream is to be a godly dream, they must begin with who God is and who God says that we are. And to find that out, we need look no further than the Bible. In fact, if any dream claims to be of God and does not also find itself deeply rooted in what God has already said, then I'm afraid it's rooted in something else. As followers of Jesus, we know that the very best examples of God's will and intention are to be found in those stories which testify to Jesus. And while we do affirm and believe that it is much as Jesus drew near, so did God's Kingdom. We also know that in our present circumstances, we do not yet experience the fullness of that Kingdom. Indeed, Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” That's why dreams are so important not only to dream but to impart and to realize because God's Kingdom is still coming. God is still bringing heaven close and drawing us into the presence and the purposes of God, and so in this way, dreams remain an integral part of God's ever unfolding drama of redeeming love.

In consultation with his team and ultimately through the writing talents of a gentleman named Earl Brown, Elvis Presley sought to have a song written that would capture the spirit of our country during the civil rights movement, and which would also serve as the final song of his comeback special in December of 1968 on NBC. In April of that same year in Elvis's hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated, and I encourage you the next time you listen to Elvis's song “If I Can Dream,” listen for those references to Dr. King's speech. The bridge verse of that song goes like this:

We're lost in a cloud with too much rain,
We're trapped in a world that's troubled with pain,
But as long as a man has the strength to dream,
He can redeem his soul and fly.

And whenever I listened to that particular verse my mind harkens back to the end of Isaiah chapter 40, which you will recall was the very chapter that found its way into Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream Speech,” and Isaiah puts it like this: “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Friends, such is the blessed assurance for all those who choose to dream with God, for those who look to the source of life in order to talk about life. Well, there is no other divine dream, save the one which God has revealed to us both through his word written, the scriptures, and through the Living Word, his Son.

So let us dream dreams of God, and let us see those greater things. Let us by God's grace see the Christ, and in Him and through Him, let us see the world as it can be, and as it should be

according to God. Because when it is God's dream and when it is God's word, it will not remain just a dream, for the Lord our God also said, "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth, it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that for which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Now, we want that to happen overnight, don't we? But God has shown us that his holy dreams are not always realized right away, but praise be to God, we worship and serve the One who will one day fulfill all things! In the meantime, may we rest in the knowledge that dreamers have their place within God's story of salvation, for they are the heralds of the things that God has said. Not only do they help us to see the things that break God's heart, they also help us to see those things that make God's heart smile. So tell me, what part of God's vision for you and for the world constitutes your dream?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.