

Gospel**John 1:29-42**

John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Follow Jesus to Find Freedom and Hope

It is with great humility that I get in the pulpit today to preach the Good News inspired by John's Gospel and the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I know the focus of my sermon - I am preaching about Freedom and Hope. But I ask your indulgence to allow me to speak about being black in the United States of America. It is an experience that compelled Dr. King to proclaim a Gospel vision of freedom and hope for all people. It is an experience of identity that half of this congregation celebrates and at the same time, an experience of racism that half of this congregation has suffered. It is an experience that I will never have. I cannot understand the experience of the black community in Montgomery, Alabama, or Atlanta, Georgia, or Baltimore, Maryland. What I do understand and I believe that we all share regardless of the color of our skin, is the Gospel promise of Freedom and Hope found in our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus is just beginning to collect his first disciples. In the other gospels, Jesus actively gathers his disciples by calling to them, "Follow me." But in John's gospel, John the Baptist has to point Jesus out and explain to people who Jesus is. John tells his disciples that he saw the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove. John testifies that Jesus is the Son of God. John calls Jesus the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." In our ears, this is a familiar title for Jesus. But for those listening to John in first century Palestine, they would have wondered what he meant. Nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures is the Messiah referred to as the Lamb of God. Nowhere else in the Gospels or the Epistles is Jesus referred to as the Lamb of God. Only Revelation picks up on this phrase and calls Jesus "the Lamb." John seems to have coined a new description of the Messiah and truth be told, it is not a very flattering metaphor. In the Jewish community, the only way a lamb took away any sins was by being sacrificed on the altar. John recognized that Jesus was the Messiah and he knew that the Jesus would not be a king or a warrior, but a lamb led to slaughter. John introduces people to Jesus,

“Here is the Son of God. Here is the Messiah we have been waiting for. He is going to take away the sins of the world by being killed.” It is a miracle that anyone chose to follow a messiah with those credentials.

Two of John’s disciples choose to follow Jesus, and they quietly walk along behind him. Jesus turns around when he notices them and he asks a simple and very loaded question, “What are you looking for?” The two men could understand this question in a number of ways – Jesus could be saying, “Why are you following me?” or “Are you lost?” or “Can I help you?” or “Who do you think I am?” or even “What is your hearts deepest desire?”

I suspect that the two men were a bit flustered when Jesus turned around. They don’t say anything about seeking the Messiah or that John told them who Jesus was. Instead, they call Jesus, “Rabbi.” And ask where he is staying. Hidden in their flustered response is, I think, their deepest desire to stay with Jesus and learn from him. They call him teacher and they want to know where he is staying so that they can be near him. They want to dwell with the Lamb of God, because somehow, in his presence they have found freedom from their sins and hope for a new life with God. Once they see where Jesus is staying, Andrew leaves Jesus to get his brother Simon Peter and bring another disciple to follow the Lamb of God.

Jesus’ disciples are drawn to him by the witness of those who have experienced the freedom and hope he brings. His presence is not that of a warrior poised to battle the sins of the world. His presence is not that of a king ready to rule over the sins of the world. He is a Lamb of God, a gentle presence of faithfulness and love and compassion ready to abide with the suffering and the poor so that they might know freedom and hope and be released from the oppression of the sins of the world. Disciples follow Jesus because they want to stay where he is staying. We are his disciples and we want to live where he lives, we want to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, we want to live in a place where freedom and hope are both a promise and a reality.

When people are living under the oppression and the violence of the sin of racism hope and freedom seem far away. There are many possible reactions to racism. Anger, fear, hatred, vengeance, depression, and despair are all genuine justifiable responses to the sin of racism. These responses may insulate us from pain of racism or give us energy to fight back, but they cannot save our soul from the corroding acid of racism. In 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, Dr. King was born into a family of faith and into a world sick with the sin of racism. His father was a preacher in the Baptist church and from the beginning there were witnesses all around him, proclaiming Jesus as the Lamb of God and inviting the young Martin King to follow him. When Jesus turned and asked Martin Luther King Jr. “What are you looking for?” I think he answered with a clear response, “Hope and freedom for my people.” And Jesus said, “Come and see.”

Dr. King knew where Jesus was staying and as a disciple, he was always following Jesus home to a place where freedom and hope are alive. Dr. King was also like Andrew – he kept reaching out to his brothers and sisters and inviting them to join him at Jesus’ house. He was trying to invite more disciples to follow Jesus and find freedom from the sins of the world and hope in a new life with God. He followed the Lamb of God, knowing full well that the lamb does not fight back or rule over the sin of the world. The lamb is slaughtered. The lamb takes away the sin of the world through forgiveness and reconciliation. The lamb exposes our sinfulness and confronts us with it through his death and then invites us to be freed from sin when we choose to follow him. Following the lamb means that we risk being slaughtered, too.

We remember Dr. King as a saint in our Episcopal tradition because whether he preached from a pulpit or led the civil rights movement or spoke against the Vietnam War, he was always

following Jesus, the Lamb of God. Dr. King was always pointing us towards a promised land of freedom and hope because he was a disciple and had seen where Jesus lives. However, 40 years after Dr. King's assassination, I do not believe that we have realized the dream that he described. The civil rights movement is not yet completed. Racism is still a sin in our society, often times it is simply veiled or pushed underground. America has become covert about the ways in which we do not respect the dignity of every human being.

That being said, by the grace of God, we have come a long way from 1968. In 1968, the complexion of this church would have looked very different than it does today. I often feel like we have discovered a piece of the dream that Dr. King imagined here at St. Mark's on the Hill. It hits me most when we gather at the altar rail for communion and as I am privileged to share the Body of Christ with you my heart is filled to bursting with joy. Joy that we are one community of faith with a diversity of races, a diversity of ages, and a diversity of life experiences. Joy that through our diversity, the Lamb of God is healing the racism of our sin-sick world. When I came to St. Mark's in September I was hoping to discover the key that unlocked the possibility for St. Mark's to be a racially diverse church. The harder I looked for a key, the more I simply saw disciples, Christians who know where Jesus lives and invite others to join them. I believe that we have all been gathered here simply because we follow Jesus, because we seek his freedom and hope, and when we follow him, we all come home to dwell in the house of the Lord.

Amen.