

“Come and See”
John 1:29-42

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This weekend as we honor the legacy and life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. it is a common practice to listen or read his speeches, to remember his words and his call to justice. We often pull our favorite quotes from “I Have a Dream” and “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” Some of us probably have his words memorized.

This year, I took a slightly different approach. I didn’t return to his sermons or speeches, although their refrains are never too far away, instead I turned to the words of one of his contemporaries, longing to learn more about Dr. King’s impact in his lifetime, as the Civil Rights Movement was still unfolding and his legacy was building, rather than from the hindsight we have 50+ years later. When we look back we talk about challenges to Dr. King’s leadership with broad strokes but how did that manifest from both his opponents and within his circle of confidants, amongst other civil rights groups, and how did his followers respond? What was it about his leadership and personhood that made him emerge as a giant among giants, a national symbol even as he was supported and surrounded by a cohort of brilliant activists and theologians and community organizers, many of whose names we struggle to remember?

So I turned to James Baldwin, who was an admirer of Dr. King’s, who had the opportunity to meet him several times and listen to him speak before crowds, and who was tasked with taking up a critical analysis of Dr. King’s work in 1961 through an essay he wrote for Harper’s Magazine called “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King.” In the essay, he described a few of his encounters with Dr. King and grappled with the current moment in the

civil rights movement and the expectations and challenges it presented with its leader. Baldwin is candid in his admiration for Dr. King but does not hold back his critiques either.

What I was most struck by was how Baldwin talks about the consistency of Dr. King, no matter who was in the room with him or what he was doing. He was who he was and he treated people the same way whether there was a crowd onlooking or he was meeting privately with someone. Baldwin shared his experience of this from the time he first met Dr. King. Baldwin convinced a mutual friend of theirs to arrange an introduction even though Dr. King was “holed up, he was seeing no one, he was busy writing a book...” in a hotel room in Atlanta. Baldwin said of that day,

“I felt terribly guilty about interrupting him but not guilty enough to let the opportunity pass. Still, having been raised among preachers, I would not have been surprised if King had cursed out the friend, refused to speak to me, and slammed the door in our faces. Nor would I have blamed him if he had, since I knew that by this time he must have been forced to suffer many an admiring fool. But the Reverend King is not like any preacher I have ever met before. For one thing, to state it baldly, I liked him. It is rare that one *likes* a world-famous-man—by the time they become world-famous they rarely like themselves, which may account for this antipathy. Yet King is immediately and tremendously winning, there is really no other word for it; and there he stood, with an inquiring and genuine smile on his face, in the open door of his hotel room. Behind him, on a desk, was a wilderness of paper. He looked at his friend, he looked at me, I was introduced; he smiled and shook my hand and we entered the room.”

Thus begins a portrait of a leader who recognized that his audience, his followers, his message must not waver regardless of the setting or who was before him or what other pressing matters might have been longing for his attention. Baldwin shared that personal anecdote but he

also provided an analysis of his larger message - how this consistency played out on the national stage. Baldwin determines that part of the uniqueness - and the source of both his appeal and his threat to the status quo - is that Dr. King had the same message for everyone: what he said to black folks he would say to white folks, what he said to white folks he would say to black folks. Baldwin wrote, "He is the first [Black] leader in my experience, or the first in many generations, of whom this can be said; most of his predecessors were in the extraordinary position of saying to white men, *Hurry*, while saying to black men, *Wait*. This fact is of utmost importance. It says a great deal about the situation which produced King and in which he operates; and, of course, it tells us a great deal about the man."

That constancy of message that he issues to all people is significant. It is a source of affirmation and inspiration for those longing for progress to hear that change must come from all people. And is it the source of challenge to those who wish to be off the hook or think that progress doesn't concern them. It pointed to a steadiness that could be trusted and revealed an unwavering, authenticity of character that broke down barriers by calling us all toward systemic transformation - not to care for your children or my children, but to care for our children, our shared future, our collective dignity and rights.

Dr. King's clear invitation to Black communities and white communities alike reminds me of the consistency of Jesus's own invitation to his disciples. Jesus's invitational message was the same whether it was to his faithful few who followed him from town to town and led alongside him or whether it was people in positions of power who were critical of his prophetic words or were threatened by his call to upend the way things had always been. His message was also the same for insiders and outsiders - giving folks on the margins a way in, making it clear that the love he foretold came from a God who cared about the poor, cared about those

imprisoned, cared about those who had been victimized or blamed or shut out from society.

Whether Jesus is impassioned, and even angry, flipping over tables in the temple, or whether he is filled with compassion, healing someone's child, washing someone's feet, providing food for those who are hungry, the same message carries through - a message of radical love that flips our expectations and calls all people into accountability and action, and toward a relationship with God.

In Jesus's first invitation to "come and see" when the disciples are not yet disciples but are curious about who he is and what he is about, we see how powerful it is to invite someone in, to show them who you are and what you believe, and then to live that out in every setting and situation. In inviting people to know him, he is inviting them toward a life transformed and to commit to doing the same in their own lives. In inviting them in, he is showing them the truth of who he is, through words and actions, in every moment that lied ahead of them.

This invitation that Jesus gives to "come and see," the same one that Dr. King's leadership exuded, is the invitation we have before us today. Not just to come and see - to follow Jesus toward God's love and a radical welcome, but to live out that same conviction in every part of our lives. When we are in the boardroom and sitting at the table where decisions are made and systems are shaped, do we have the courage to speak truth to power or do we wait until we are at the watercooler to grumble about what should have been? When we are faced with bigotry and hatred in the checkout line or at the bank or around the family dinner table, do we call on the forces of love and justice to proclaim a different way or do we back away in silence, too uncomfortable with conflict to speak up and rock the boat? Do we present the same version of ourselves with our friends as well as those who stand against us? Do we show up with authenticity, inviting those around us to come and see what we are about and what we believe?

The call to authentic leadership, to let people in and then show up with our full selves is not just for our great public leaders. It is not just the expectation we can place on the Dr. Martin Luther Kings of the world. We might not have the next James Baldwin track us down for an interview for a major magazine or have a national holiday declared on our birthday. It's not just for Jesus and the prophets. We might not have stories of our lives passed down across centuries, transcribed into every language and retold each week around the world. But we have people in our lives who are watching, who are listening, who are wondering who we follow, what we stand for, and where we might lead them.

Will we echo Jesus' words and invite those folks to come and see? Will we show the same passion for justice and peace come Monday as we do on Sunday morning? Will we show up with love and compassion or dare to be impassioned when the Spirit nudges us to speak? It is one thing to study scripture together and pray in the safety of our sanctuary, but the call and cost of discipleship asks us to put the strength that we pray for into action whenever we leave this place. Come and see, Jesus said to his disciples. We have seen for ourselves the power of this invitation. In following and seeing, may we use our own lives and our own voices to continue to invite others in toward that same call to God's love. May it be so.