

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Year B

January 15, 2012

1 Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:43-51

Pastor David Tryggestad

Concordia Evangelical Lutheran Church

Duluth, Minnesota

“You will see greater things than these.”

I am struck by these words of Jesus to Nathanael. These words have been a constant mantra for me all week. “You will see greater things than these.”

What does this mean?

One thing I’m quite sure it doesn’t mean is “the power of positive thinking.” One conclusion a person might make from these words is that following the call of Jesus leads to a path of roses, down “easy street.” “Say Yes to God and all my problems will be solved; doors of opportunity opened, all barriers torn down.”

I was struck and deeply saddened by an obituary in the paper this past week. It was the exuberant, enthusiastic smile that I recognized. I didn’t know him well enough to call him a friend; he was rather an acquaintance. We would cross paths at the YMCA occasionally. It was only upon seeing his photo in the paper that I remembered that I had not seen his for a long time, at least a year. I’ll never forget the first time we met; he invited me to his church for worship the next Sunday. (From that, I knew he was *not* a Lutheran!) I didn’t think to question his bald head, as it’s almost the fashion these days for men to shave their heads; it was only later, after he told me something about himself, that I noticed the scars in his scalp from the surgeries to his brain. Patrick Plys died at age 48 after battling brain cancer for 17 years. He left behind a wife and five children, one of whom had been a student in my wife, Lynn’s, English class some years back. Despite his battle with cancer, Patrick was one of the most radiant, joyful people I have ever met. No doubt, at some point in his walk with our Lord, he heard Jesus say to him, “You will see greater things than these.” But those greater things did not include long life. One of those greater things was that Patrick built a school for the Masai tribe in Kenya.

“You will see greater things than these.”

This week we note some remarkable commemorations. The most obvious one to us is that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom we remember tomorrow. We are all familiar with enough of his story to know that he was driven by his deep sense of calling from our Lord, even while he knew very well that his life would be in danger should he accept that call. He claimed to have arrived at the mountain, but that he would not live to experience life on the other side. He was like Moses in that regard.

“You will see greater things than these.”

Other lesser known commemorations are also observed this week. Antony, known as a “desert father,” was so struck by the command in the gospel, “Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21), that he gave up his considerable inheritance, giving everything to the poor, except enough to care for his younger sister. He lived most of the rest of his life as a hermit in Egypt, devoting his life to the study of scripture and to prayer. He supported himself making baskets, and whatever money he had left over, he gave away. Antony died in 356, over one hundred years old.

In sharp contrast to such an extremely long life, Agnes died in Rome at the young age of 12 or 13 in the year 304. It was a time of great persecution of the Church under the Roman Emperor Diocletian. While many Christians defected from the faith, denying their faith to escape persecution, young Agnes openly professed her faith in our Lord. As a result, a Roman soldier slit her throat.

“You will see greater things than these.”

On a recent flight to LA to visit our daughter, I overheard a conversation between two young men in their 20s sitting to my right (they were ignoring the “old man” sitting to their left on the aisle). The subject of Christianity came up. The one next to me said to the one to his right at the window, “How can you believe anything written in a book more than 2000 years old, written by a bunch of men? They were only human, like us.”

Such is the challenge the culture throws up to us who claim to be Christians. I was hopeful that I would have the opportunity to engage either of both of them in conversation, without inserting myself inappropriately. When the man at the window nodded off to sleep, I struck up a conversation with the 21-year-old sitting next to me on my right, the one who had asked the question. After we talked a lot about him, his family, and his plans for both the immediate and long-term future, he asked about me. When he learned that I had left music ministry to go to seminary at age 35, he asked, “Why did you do that?” *There* was my opening and my invitation to share my sense of calling. The Apostle Peter admonishes us, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15b).

“How do you hear God talk to you?” This was the question from one of the confirmation students during the last gathering before Christmas. We were talking about Joshua in the Old Testament. I find that, when we take teenagers’ questions seriously, they ask serious questions. This was a serious question. “How do you hear God talk to you?”

My first response was, “In scripture.” Notice that Andrew says to Nathanael in our gospel for today, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Andrew knew his scriptures. And he knew that when he met Jesus, he had met the Messiah . . . “about whom Moses in the law and

also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” How do you hear God talk to you? In scripture.

That’s the first thing I said to Mark, the 21-year-old sitting next to me on the plane to LA. It was Mark who made the comment, “How can you believe anything written in a book more than 2000 years old, written by a bunch of men? They were only human, like us.” I wanted Mark to know that, for me, that “book more than 2000 years old, written by a bunch of men,” is the living word of God. When Mark asked me why, at 35 years old, I left a job and a home and friends to enter the seminary to become a pastor, I told him that it was “my sense of our Lord’s call and claim on my life and my understanding of that call in scripture.”

Mark reminds me of Nathanael in our gospel: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Mark might put it, “Can anything good come out of a book more than 2000 years old, written by a bunch of men?” Andrew might respond, “Come and see!” Jesus would respond, “You will see greater things than these.”

In our First Lesson, we hear another well-known call narrative. Samuel is only a boy. He has been brought by his mother, Hannah, to the temple in Shiloh, to serve under the tutelage of the old priest, Eli. Three times Samuel hears the voice of the Lord, but all three times he thinks he is hearing the voice of Eli. When Eli finally perceives that it is the Lord calling Samuel, he instructs the boy how to respond: “. . . if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” If we were to keep reading in the text of 1 Samuel, we would see that the Lord gave young Samuel a hard word of judgment to give to his beloved Eli.

“How do you hear God talk to you?” The question from our confirmation student in December comes back to me. How did Samuel know it was the voice of the Lord? Eli, the old priest, Samuel’s mentor in the faith, helped him discern the voice. Our confirmation teachers and guides—and all of you here—are some of those who assist our young people in discerning the voice of the Lord in the midst of the cacophony of noise that surrounds them. This begins when we take them and their questions seriously.

After our plane landed in LA, as we were getting out of our seats, Mark said, “It was nice meeting you.” I asked, “Is it OK if I pray for you.” “Please,” he responded earnestly. Then he said, “Thank you.”

There are a lot of Marks out there.

“You will see greater things than these.”

Earlier in my sermon I said that Jesus is not talking about the power of positive thinking. Far from it.

I’m reading a lot of Martin Luther these days, and, no doubt, I will share quite a lot of Luther with you in the months ahead. The notion of the power of positive thinking is not

new to late 20<sup>th</sup>-century mega-church preachers. It was rampant in Luther's day. Luther called it a "theology of glory." Luther said, "The 'theologian of glory' calls the bad good and the good bad. The 'theologian of the cross' says what a thing is."<sup>1</sup>

A theology of the cross, according to Luther, talks about the hiddenness of God under the apparent opposite of God. A theology of the cross looks at the cross—at the pain, the suffering, the despair—and sees the love of Jesus for his people: for Antony of Egypt, who forsook his inheritance to live a life of prayer, devotion, scripture, and poverty; for Agnes, who offered her life at a young age rather than denounce her faith; for Martin Luther King, Jr., who went to the mountain top but was not allowed to experience life on the other side; to Mark, the 21-year-old on the plane who asks, "How can you believe anything written in a book more than 2000 years old, written by a bunch of men?"; to Patrick Plys, who fought brain cancer for 17 years and died at 48; to the boy Samuel, who was called to bring a hard word, a difficult word, to his beloved mentor Eli; to Nathanael and to all the disciples, all but one of whom died a violent death because of their faith and devotion to our Lord; to a confirmation student who asks a serious question, "How do you hear God talk to you?"

"You will see greater things than these."

I suspect that you could ask anyone here who has responded positively to the call of our Lord, and they could tell you about the greater things they have seen in their lives. And, if we were to add up all of these greater things, our Lord would still say to us, "You will see greater things than these."

Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis No. 21.