

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany/January 15, 2017

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We are in the second week after the Epiphany. It is a time for manifesting Jesus. Who is this person whom John the Baptist called the Lamb of God? John uses the imperative, "Look." Pay attention. Take his measure. Scrutinize this person. Here is the Lamb of God. Now John was pretty rough and aggressive. He almost scared people into the water of baptism! His notion of the Lamb of God was the conquering lamb of Jewish end-time thinking who would meet evil head-on with even mightier force to destroy it.

Well, he got the right person but the wrong lamb. Rather than a destroyer lamb, Jesus saw himself as the Passover lamb. That is the lamb without blemish that each family slaughtered, whose blood was smeared on the doorjamb of their homes in Egypt, preserving their first-born and setting the stage for their liberation or exodus from slavery. At Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit, imaged as a dove, remained on him. It dwelt within him and always would. The dove is a feminine and even motherly image that imparts qualities of healing and freedom. We are a far cry from John's Lamb.

In addition, Jesus saw himself as the Passover Lamb in the context of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. This is not the conquering lamb but the one who is "deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers." Not exactly who John had in mind. But this is the one whom God has chosen, to whom God has given strength to gather the peoples as one.

The Isaiah reading is the second servant song. There is a note of discouragement. Israel has been conquered by the Assyrians, driven into exile by the Babylonians, and then would come the Persians. "I have labored in vain," bemoans the Servant, "I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." Now, there are places in the Bible that make me laugh and this is one

of them. The servant is dejected and you would think God would empathize. But no; God says – so, you think restoring Israel is too heavy for you. Not a bit of it. In fact, it is way too light a thing, mere child's play. Instead, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Wow. Instead of looking down, God lifts the servant's sights. Go big. Look. Your calling is to enlighten the whole world.

Jesus' baptism in the Jordan takes place right after his 40-day sojourn in the wilderness. I wonder if he too felt small before the task set before him. As Jesus told others, he too would have to "come and see." The Holy Spirit energized him for the path ahead.

Martin Luther King, Jr., like the Apostle Paul, wrote a letter from prison. King's Letter was from a Birmingham jail. He tells of his disappointment at being called an extremist. And after his release from prison, preaching about this, one can hear in the recording the hurt in his voice. To be an extremist in the national consciousness of the time was to be beyond the pale, even evil. But like the Servant in Isaiah, like Jesus after the wilderness, the task ahead for him was too large to be dimmed by discouragement, too considerable to be contained in a Birmingham cell. It would encompass generations and play out on a world stage.

From jail Martin Luther King thought of the major figures who came before him: Jesus, an extremist for love; the Prophet Amos for justice; the Apostle Paul, an extremist for the Christian gospel. Then others: Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson. The task that God places before us is not too great. Just look at those who have come before. They all were unassailable authorities who pointed the way toward channeling discouragement to creative action. Rather than a label of hurt, "extremism" in this company is a badge of honor.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was in our Assistant Emmanuel's home country of Ghana in 1957 before Emmanuel was born (You youngster!). He witnessed the inauguration of Kwame Nkrumah as the first president of this new country. King reflected that the moment linked him with present-day Africans and his own slave forebears. He walked the streets of the capital city Accra

weeping with joy as he heard Ghanaians, young and old, crying out “freedom!” It may have been there that an inner voice whispered the words that would one day ring out from the Lincoln memorial at the March on Washington: “And I could hear that old Negro spiritual once more crying out: ‘Free at last, free at last, Great God Almighty, I’m free at last.’”

There were those who argued that the church should stay out of social engagement and action. Jerry Falwell who would go on to lead the Moral Majority was a segregationist preacher at the time. He said, “The Christian’s citizenship is in heaven. Our only purpose on earth... is to know Christ and make Him known...” Ironically, because of the role he would later play in politics, Falwell went on to say, “Preachers are not called to be politicians but to be soul winners.” King countered that Christianity is not an otherworldly religion disengaged from God’s will on earth for wellbeing and peace.

So if we are to engage the world and we have taken a good look at Jesus as John the Baptist says we must, what is the manner of our service? First, it is not coercive or destructive. We do not follow the Lamb that John had in mind. That does not mean that the way ahead is gentle. We are to meet imposing self-will with self-giving love. The only way to stand our ground is to remain in Christ, and then to follow. The two words, remain and follow, seem contradictory, but they are essential to any Christian who seeks to make a difference in daily life.

There is mutuality to remaining. We, like John’s disciples, remain with Jesus, and Jesus’ Spirit remains with us. Come and see where I abide Jesus says and remain with me there. Remain with my teaching where there is light and truth and love. Is that a gentle path? Martin Luther King like some of those he quoted in his letter met with opposition, hurtful labels, even death. But it was the way to make the difference he did. Our path may be less steep, but the way of self-giving love will have its challenges. Where do we turn then for strength? To the Holy Spirit who remained in Jesus and remains in us. The Spirit gives us the words to say and guides us to action that is creative.

The second word is follow. The Christian faith is an active faith. At baptism we promise to follow and obey Jesus as our Lord. John’s disciples

followed Jesus. One, named Andrew, brought his brother Peter to follow Jesus as well. We invite friends. Martin Luther King challenged the Christians of his day whom they would follow. Follow Jesus, he said. Give of yourself for love. Extend yourself for justice. Go to the greatest lengths for love, truth, and goodness.

Look. Jesus is manifestly compassionate. There is something about him, when we have really looked, that draws us. We want to know where he's at, what he's about? "Come and see," he invites. Can we refuse love and goodness, truth and justice? Not hardly. We follow Jesus and find that he is staying in the world. "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus leads us in mending what we see that is broken. When discouraged he laughingly lifts our sights. When hurt by labels we stand our ground because God is present where we stand. We remain in Christ and Christ in us. And we follow in the way of love. This mission is one of faith. It is carried out over generations and beyond the bounds of any one community. The arc of the moral universe is long," Martin Luther King said on another occasion, "but it bends toward justice."

*Amen.*