



**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
Eugene, Oregon  
“At Home” Worship  
**January 17, 2021**

*Gathering Around God’s Word*

*If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together. (If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At- Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)*

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

The one who calls us together this day yearns for each of us and for all people to hear and be blessed.

**Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.**

Blessed is the One who comes bringing trustworthy words for the healing of the world.

**Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.**

**OPENING HYMN**

*You Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim*

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**CALL TO CONFESSION**

Assured that the One who calls us to hear and obey already knows the confessions of our hearts and is ready to forgive, let us confess our sin before God and one another.

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Holy God, you see into each of us and know us fully as creatures in need of care. We confess that we have neither heard your word nor followed your will. Give us ears to hear your wisdom. Lead us to honesty and faith so that we may begin again with renewed strength; in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

**DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS**

God knows the hearts of those who seek forgiveness, and by grace you have been saved. Your sins are no more. You have been made clean.

*The Word*

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

By your Holy Spirit, O God, open our ears, our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to the Holy Word so that it comes to rule within us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

## SCRIPTURE READINGS

*Old Testament Reading: Genesis 28:10-19*

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

*New Testament Reading: 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 toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get 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."

## ANTHEM

## SERMON

"The Point of Contact"

Rev. David Ukropina

This Sunday is the second Sunday after Epiphany, and as I've mentioned before, we don't officially have a season of Epiphany in the Presbyterian church. From now until Transfiguration Sunday and the start of Lent in February, it will be ordinary time on the liturgical calendar.

Yet still the text today from the gospel of John about Jesus calling Philip and Nathanael is a kind of epiphany passage. The central part of the reading involves a longer dialogue between Jesus and Nathanael where Nathanael has an epiphany as to who Jesus is. I've mentioned before that John's gospel often involves these longer dialogues between Jesus and one other person.

In today's passage, Jesus calls Philip to follow him, and then Philip tells Nathanael, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Right

away, we see John insisting on the humanness and ordinariness of Jesus, reminding us that he has a human father and comes from a small town.

Just in this part of the text, there is no indication at first that Jesus is anything other than a normal person. This text serves as an important bridge between the transcendent word of God we hear about at the start of John's gospel, and the rest of the narration. Although we the readers know that Jesus is God, the people around him do not.

At the time, Nazareth was just a small village of about 300 people, and it was economically dependent on the city of Sepphoris, which was nearby and the capital of Galilee. The Hebrew scriptures never mention Nazareth, nor tie it to any messianic expectations, so it's appropriate that Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" in response to the claim that Jesus is the messiah.

The response from Jesus to Nathanael is brief but full of meaning. Jesus responds to Nathanael by saying "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" This is a kind of play on words. The word Israelite was first used for Jacob, whose name means either deceiver or grasper. It's almost like Jesus saying, here is a deceiver in whom there is no deceit.

Nathanael is clearly shaken when he responds, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus has shown a kind of insight into the character of Nathanael, and we can tell in Jesus saying Nathanael has no deceit that Jesus values those who have honesty, genuineness and integrity, the way that Nathanael does.

When Jesus says he saw Nathanael under the fig tree, Nathanael replies that Jesus is the Son of God and the King of Israel, which is a powerful statement of faith. Something profound has happened to Nathanael, and he has seen through to who Jesus is. It's hard for us to know exactly what happened, but Nathanael must have had a kind of epiphany into the nature of Jesus Christ.

It bears remembering that earlier in John chapter one, John tells us that all things were made in and through Christ, and John will again remind us at the end of chapter two that Jesus knew all people, and we see this directly in the way that Jesus knows Nathanael and the way that Nathanael realizes this.

The last Sunday I preached, I mentioned the theologian Karl Barth, who I think about a lot, and I'm reminded here of something Barth once said about the attractive power of the pre-existing bond that exists being Christ and all people. Nathanael senses this bond, and responds with a declaration of affirming the divinity of Christ.

It comes as a shock that this everyday person from Nazareth is divine, and we read later in this passage that Jesus tells Nathanael, "you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

This last verse of today's passage is yet another tie to the Jacob story. Just as Jesus alluded to Jacob in talking about an Israelite without deceit, here Jesus directly refers to the familiar story of Jacob and the ladder. That text comes from Genesis chapter 28. It was not the regular Old Testament lectionary reading today, but I included it because of its connection to John.

In the Genesis story, Jacob is fleeing from his brother Esau when he has his famous dream of the angels ascending and descending the ladder to heaven, and God speaking to Jacob, telling him that God will be with him and will keep him wherever he goes. When Jacob wakes up from his dream, he constructs a pillar of remembrance, and calls the place Bethel, which means the House of God.

Ever since the early church Fathers, Christians have written about the connection between Jacob's ladder and Jesus Christ being the meeting point or connecting point between heaven and earth. Jesus himself makes this connection when he tells Nathanael he will see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

Early church figures such as Irenaeus, Origen and Augustine have all written about this connection between Jacob's ladder and Jesus. In our own era, Karl Barth has written about the way that Jesus is the sole point of contact between God and humans. Jesus is the only way that sinful and fallen humanity can ever hope to see and connect with almighty God. Jesus is the very meeting point between heaven and earth.

And what that reading of the text says to me is that we humans have to rely upon the initiative that God

in Jesus Christ takes in our world for us to know God. Notice how dependent both Nathanael and Jacob are upon God in these encounters. Jacob was actually asleep when God visited him, so there is nothing in his initiative to reach God.

Nathanael also is dependent upon Jesus recognizing and reaching out to him, when Nathanael has no idea at first who Jesus is, knowing him only as some person from Nazareth. It's the same in the calling of the other disciples, as well as throughout the Bible, such as when God initiates the covenant with Abraham when Abraham himself is actually asleep at the time.

In the Presbyterian church, we emphasize this theme repeatedly, that we, fallen humanity, are not capable of reaching up to God or knowing God just on our own effort or ability. We completely depend upon the grace and power of God to make God known to us through the person of Jesus, through the Spirit, through the Bible, through the church, and just in our daily lives.

This theme is present throughout the rest of the biblical narrative, and it is present in these stories that come to us from John's gospel and from Genesis. If we see the face of God, it is due to the love and the initiative that God takes in our lives and in the midst of the brokenness of human history.

When I began this sermon, I started mentioning the church calendar and the time of Epiphany. This Sunday also lies close to the national holiday celebrating Martin Luther King Jr's birthday. While these two things are separate on the calendar, their proximity in time had me reflecting this week on the connection between the two.

So much has been written and thought about Martin Luther King Jr that I don't feel I have very much to add. One thing that always does strike me in conversations about him, however, is that at least in the secular media, it seems infrequent to me that people focus on his religious and seminary training.

The conversation and discussion usually focuses on civil rights at the time, as it should, but often I find the religious dimension to Martin Luther King Jr. is left out of the conversation. Yet from my perspective, much of the power that Dr King had came from his thorough grounding in theology and the biblical witness.

The vision that Dr King had, the dream that he had, was completely rooted in the message of the Bible. We are familiar with the language from some of his most famous speeches, much of which come directly from the Bible, such as when he quotes Isaiah in saying one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low.

In the same vein, King told us "one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Now just rehearsing these words reminds us all of how far we still have to go in fulfilling that dream, but the vision of equality and justice comes to us directly from the Bible and from the divinity of Christ. In the person of Jesus Christ, heaven and earth come together, and there is a meeting point between transcendent, almighty God, and this physical, fallen planet.

And that meeting point brings with it a call and a demand for equality. When heaven and earth meet in the person of Christ, it calls all of us to love as Jesus did, and to love all people with equality. It means that all people are equally loved and equally valued in God's eyes, who made all people.

That means people of all races are equal, and to be treated equally. It means men and women have equality. It means children and adults are of equal value. It means rich and poor are equally valued, and yes, it even means that Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals are equally loved and valued by God.

At first, the equality of God sounds like a simple, straightforward thing, but there is really a radical nature to it. The equality and justice of God inherently banishes all racism, all sexism, and all hatred and animosity towards those we would despise or set ourselves above and against.

And all of this is available and knowable to us because God came down to us in Jesus Christ. In the person of Jesus, all of us, Jacob, Nathanael, Karl Barth, Martin Luther King Jr., all of us, know and see and experience the radical love and equality that come from Christ.

In one of my favorite books that talks about Martin Luther King Jr., Philip Yancey writes about Dr King helping him out of his own racist upbringing, by saying, “In the end, it was not King’s humanitarianism that got through to me, nor his Gandhian example of nonviolent resistance, nor his personal sacrifices, inspiring as those may be.

It was his grounding in the Christian gospel that finally made me conscious of the beam in my eye and forced me to attend to the message he was proclaiming. Because he kept quoting Jesus, eventually I had to listen.” (Soul Survivor, p 40).

It’s been said that heaven is the place where love reigns. We see that in the angels descending from heaven in Jacob’s dream, in Jesus meeting Nathanael in the middle of his life, and in the work and ministry of Dr King, which still call out to us in a fallen world with a vision of equality and love, that come to us straight from God. Amen.

#### AFFIRMATION OF FAITH - from Colossians 1:15-20

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible. All things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. Amen.

#### *Responding to God’s Word*

#### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD’S PRAYER**

May we now gather together in prayer.

Let us now pray for the world, for leaders of nations, that wisdom and integrity will prevail for the good of all people, for regions in conflict, that peace may reign...

Let us pray for all people of faith, for the unity of the body of Christ, that divisions may not turn people away from the church...

Let us pray for our own nation, for national leaders, state leaders, city councils, that all consideration be given to what is best for those they govern...

Let us pray for those in need, for all who are hungry, for those with no home or employment, for parents and children who live in fear, for those in mourning...

For all other concerns let us now pray silently...

With thanksgiving, we remember all those who have shaped us in your ways, O God. Receive our prayers, through Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray...

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**

#### *Sending of God’s Word*

#### CLOSING HYMN

*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*

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#### BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49