

1 Samuel 3:1-20 ~ John 1:43-51

*You Will See Greater Things*

January 17, 2021 ~ 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany ~ Martin Luther King Sunday

*Introduction to 1<sup>st</sup> Lesson Scripture Drama:*

Strange things can happen when we are sleeping soundly in our beds and get suddenly awakened in the middle of the night. “What was that?” Your heart starts pounding. You are definitely no longer asleep. It can be scary for grown ups as well as children. Did you ever think it might be God calling you? God has surprising ways of getting our attention to show us things we have not seen before. Especially when we are in a funk we can’t get out of; or when we are trying to avoid a new reality that God wants us to see.

That’s what both of our scriptures lessons are about today. Our first story is very old—even by biblical standards. It is in the Old Testament in 1 Samuel and happened about 1200 years before Jesus was born, even before the time of King Saul, David, and Solomon. We are going to get to time travel all the way back there right now, in our imaginations. Picture our sanctuary here at FPC as the temple in Shiloh, a town about halfway between Jerusalem and Samaria. In the temple, fast asleep, are the boy Samuel, who has lived in the temple since he was very young, and his mentor who is raising him, the old Priest Eli. They are asleep because it is the middle of the night.

*Introduction to 2<sup>nd</sup> scripture lesson:*

Our second story jumps 1200 years forward into broad daylight on one of Jesus’ first days of his earthly ministry according to the Gospel of John, chapter 1. This is a very long chapter that begins at the beginning of creation with the phrase, “In the beginning was the Word” and ends with today’s story where Jesus is getting down to business, recruiting disciples. Andrew and Peter were already on board. Philip was an easy sell, but for cynical, big-town snob Nathanael, Jesus pulls out all the stops. And it works: Nathanael goes all in, saying in a sense, “Here I am” when he sees Jesus for who he is. And then, Jesus alerts these four to the new dimension they have just signed up to take be a part of. It is another night a vision that predicts, not destruction and devastation like Samuel’s prophecy, but quite the opposite. A vision beyond their wildest dreams.

*Sermon*

Do you have a “Come and See” story somewhere in your life? I am guessing that you do. Probably more than one if you get to thinking about it. What I mean by a “Come and See” story is any time you were moved to go somewhere that was new or strange to you; or to talk to someone you didn’t already know, but for some mysterious reason, decided to take the risk. And this sometimes split second decision opened a path, started a relationship, made you see yourself or this world in a new way. See if you can think of a “Come and See” moment in your life, maybe later today--and share it with a family member or friend, or write about it. Whether recent or long ago, these inflection points can continue to open up the “greater things” that Christ is calling you to see.

I want to share a “Come and See” story I came across recently told by Lutheran Pastor Kelly Chatman, that opened his middle school eyes and heart to something he had never seen or experienced. Spoiler alert: the promise of “pretty girls” was the hook. (Something God has been using as a youth group recruiting technique for years.) This is how he tells it, *I have been actively engaged in the church since middle school when I wandered into a church after hearing a new classmate describe how pretty the girls were in his church. I got the directions wrong and found myself in a church where no one else looked anything like me. Before I could exit, two Sunday school teachers had me stand in the front of the entire Sunday school while they began to sing a song, “There’s a welcome here, there’s a welcome here, there’s a Christian welcome here.” In that moment I experienced a reality I had not imagined existing. That welcome I experienced through children and Sunday school teachers inspired and equipped me to serve a church of radical welcome to others, in and outside of our church walls.*<sup>i</sup>

The radical welcome that Pastor Kelly’s “Come and See” moment gave him as a middle school boy, reset him on a path toward “greater things” for over a half-century and counting. A path on which Christ revealed to him his greatest spiritual gift: vision. And I see a connection between Pastor Kelly’s vision and the “greater things” that Jesus’ described with his Jacob’s dream vision, of “heaven opening and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” (John 1:51) Pastor Kelly’s said it like this: *I believe the kingdom of God is accessible and embodied in the church as an everyday reality... I can see possibilities others may see as impossible. I believe in people others have been conditioned not to see for their God given potential. This spiritual gift of faith and vision blesses me to see results in places where other people see impossibility.*<sup>ii</sup>

In a way that only God can do, I became one of the countless beneficiaries of Pastor Kelly’s vision, back in 2016. Little did I see or know at the time, but Pastor Kelly’s vision and faith brought me to his office at Redeemer Lutheran Church in the Harrison neighborhood of north Minneapolis. I was doing research for my doctoral project on young adult spirituality which I titled, “Listening to the Moment: Where Young Adults Are Finding Church.” Obviously my first challenge was to locate young adults who were indeed “finding church.” Yes, they are a rare breed these days. Because of this sad reality, sometimes young adults (aged 18 – 29) who are actively engaged in the leadership of mainline churches are called “unicorns.” My project included young adult church leaders in New York City and Minneapolis.

In my quest for young adults who had found church in Minneapolis, I was told my first day in town, “to talk to Kelly Chatman.” As my mother would say, “he didn’t

know me from a hole in the wall.” But that did not matter to Pastor Kelly. From my very first conversation with him, I had the amazing experience of being fully welcomed, listened to, and given all the access I needed to interview some of the young adult leaders he was mentoring at Redeemer Lutheran. It didn’t matter that I was a total outsider, a strange white lady minister from Ohio pursuing her doctoral degree at age 59.

In my conversations with these young adults they shared their pain and also their vision for the church. My “Come and See” experiences with them gave me hope. Out of their vision they had already begun to form new ways the church could be a source of healing in our hurting world. They spoke of epiphanies about how the church had failed them, but also how it had saved them.

I would say these conversations felt something like “Eli moments” for me. Did you notice in our first scripture lesson how courageously and faithfully old Eli received the hard word from the Lord through young Samuel? Eli is an unlikely champion of truth in this story. We given a glimpse of a priest willing to listen to what he knows will be hard criticism. He asked Samuel to relay all of it, “word for word.” Eli did not use his age and privilege to minimize the truth of what young Samuel relayed. Nor did Eli gaslight him in any way.

This was Eli’s one shining moment in his mostly tragic story—showing us how to listen to hard criticism and recognize the truth in it, no matter how difficult. Things did indeed go very badly from there for Eli and the Israelites: The Philistines killed 30,000 men of Israel in battle, including Eli’s two sons, and captured the Ark of the Covenant. News of this horrendous loss, especially the capture of the Ark brought on Eli’s traumatic death, as well.

We have here a cautionary tale for us today when it also seems as though the Word of the Lord is rare, and visions are not widespread. Is this our Eli moment as a church and as a nation? Through what and through whom is God speaking hard truth to us today? I hear a call, as part of the white, old guard, church establishment to listen to for how God is speaking through our younger people. We have already seen God raise up young prophets in the fight to save our planet, the need to stem gun violence, and the call for racial justice. Are we really listening? It is time for us to say, “Here I am.” It is time for us to “Come and See” and then “Go and Do” as Christ leads us forward.

We can do this because of the bridge between heaven and earth that we have been given in Christ, identified in John 1:51 as the Son of *all* humanity. It is the power of our Lord and Savior that calls us to “Come and See” and gives us the courage to take a hard look and to grieve the ugliness we see, together. We have a young voice we get to hear, we need to hear today, on Martin Luther King Sunday.

As they say in congress, “I will yield” the rest of my time to the voice of Joe Davis performing his spoken poem, “The King Lives.” Joe is one of the young adults I interviewed at Redeemer Lutheran Church four years ago. Pastor Kelly recruited him the very first time they met to be a part of Redeemer Lutheran. Joe told me, he didn’t have any idea what that meant or what he would be doing. As it turned out, one of his jobs was to become a part their worship team and one of their resident poets, at their open mic Friday night community worship gatherings called “H-Cubed” (Harrison, Harmony, and Healing). And here he is now with a poem he just wrote for the Church Anew 2021 Martin Luther King service...

Yes, Christ the King, lives deep down in you, in me, in us. Like Nathanael, may we shed our skepticism and instead “Come and See” greater things, and then “go and do,” as Christ is calling us, here and now. For Christ’s sake.

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<sup>i</sup> *Churchanew.org*

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*