

Epiphany 2B – “Annual Meeting and Inauguration” Reverend Jennifer Adams – January 18, 2009

As I prepared to preach today I was very aware that we are at the beginning of an amazing week in our world. Here are just a few of the things that are going on during the week of January 18, 2009:

Tomorrow is the observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day a day on which we remember and man whose vision changed our country forever, a human being whose courage and message empowered a people to stand up and walk or to stay seated and ride and in all of it to demand equal access to public services, education, protection and respect. Regardless of when or where you were born my guess is that we all carry images in our mind of the protests and the marches and we carry audio bits too, memories of Dr King’s inspirational speeches that have become part of the vocabulary of our people. Martin Luther King Jr. Day an opportunity for us to celebrate and recommit to the dream.

Today is also the beginning of the 100th annual world-wide week of prayer for Christian Unity. This is a week in which Christians of all denominations are invited to come together on shared ground, a week to pray and to work for peace, to be peace among those and as those who proclaim the Christ. The theme was chosen this year by an ecumenical group from South Korea. It’s “We are no longer strangers. Christ has broken down the walls that separate us.” There will be ecumenical services held throughout the week around the world. And tonight we’ll gather at Pillar Christian Reformed Church with about 10 other local churches (Reformed, Methodist, Catholic, Christian Reformed, Lutheran, and Presbyterian) to pray together for the church and the world, giving thanks for one another’s gifts to the Body of Christ.

And, you probably know that on Tuesday we’ll celebrate the inauguration of a new President, one who’s using the language of unity and hope and inviting a remarkable breadth and diversity of leaders and representatives from across the country to participate in the many celebrations of this moment. No matter where you stand politically, this is huge and at some level, probably for all of us contains at least some seeds of hope for our country and for the world.

OK, now I want to bring in the gospel and just so we don’t get bored, touch on our Annual Meeting too. Hang in there. Let’s see where all of this takes us.

In our reading today, Jesus had begun calling his disciples. According to the gospel of John, after his baptism, Jesus began inviting people to follow him, and today we heard about the call given to Phillip and Nathaniel. Jesus was in Galilee, invited Phillip to follow and Phillip who was from Bethsaida (the city of Andrew and Peter we’re told) . . . Phillip went and told Nathaniel about this discovery: “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth,” Phillip said. But Nathaniel’s response was a sarcastic one, a horrible one really, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he asked. And if we stopped there for a minute, we’d be resting on one of the worst mistakes we can make as human beings and I think we’d also find a first connection with some of the other things I mentioned that are going on this week.

Nathaniel's question seems a little ridiculous to us, funny even since it's remote and we know how the story plays out. Of course something good came out of Nazareth. Something miraculous. But I think the question itself revealed a real prejudice, Nathaniel wasn't "only joking;" he and many in his culture really wondered if anything good, let alone the Messiah could come from that place. And I think that somewhere in each of us there lingers this question about some place or some group of people who are other to us. At one point in our country we asked, 'Can anything good come out of Selma, Alabama?' And at various points in our barrier building as Body of Christ we've asked things like "Can anything good come out of the Christian Reformed Church or the Catholic Church or the radical Christian right? Some have nerve enough to ask if anything good can come from Episcopalians, in fact some in the Anglican Communion are asking just that." And we also know that part of why Barack Obama's election is so worthy of celebration is that for way too long we asked if a person worthy of leading our country could emerge from the black community in the United States. This gospel reading and all of the events this week are reminders to us that that question about "good" coming from places or people who are other from us is a dangerous one, one that with Nathaniel, we should let go of completely.

Because, if for no other reason, God answered all of those questions with a resounding YES. "Yes," God said, "good can come from all of those places. And then God invited all the rest of us to catch on. It didn't take Nathaniel long; he jumped on board pretty quickly when Jesus invited him to "Come and see" and even then Jesus informed him that there was way more to come. The response was "Yes" to good coming out of Selma, Alabama – liberating, equality building, opportunity offering, brother and sister making kinds of good. The answer is a resounding and ongoing "Yes" to good coming out of every branch of the Body of Christ – Catholic good, Reformed good, and yes, even Episcopal good. And Yes to black leaders who are every bit as capable as white ones. It seems ridiculous that the question could still be alive.

And so this week we have all been invited to come and see. That's what our Annual Meeting is about too. Can anything good come out of a budget squeeze? Can anything good come from a community struggling to make ends meet. Of course it can!!! Yes, because God is here too working in us and through us to spread the kingdom of God in this time and in this place as the people of Grace we have been called to be. I am astonished at the good being done here: the ministries, the housing, the singing, the feeding, the learning, the growing, the inviting, the care. At Grace there are challenges before us but oh so much to celebrate and to share.

And so I encourage you not to miss out on the power and the beauty of this week in our church, other churches and in our world too. King was a dreamer, but he's not the only one. See this week as an invitation to lay down that horrible question forever and open your heart wide to the "way more" that God is working, listening to the invitation to all people to "come and see."