

John 1:35-50

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). 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."

If we were to be visiting the city of Capernaum while James, John, Andrew, and Peter were out fishing we would be stunned by the beauty of the land and lake. As we walked through the countryside, we would be breathing air perfumed by a stunning variety of flowers, many of them soon to become fruits and vegetables in a breadth of variety offered few places in the world. Look at the citrus groves intermingled with pomegranates, avocados, figs, olives, and then vineyards in every direction. Every home boasted a luxurious garden promising a luxurious and bountiful harvest.

It is early morning and we are stepping down from the main road to the rocky beach. There is no sand here, but a shoreline of pebbles. The mists rising from the water in the still morning blocks the rising sun and obscures the fishing boats as they approach the shore. We can hear their oars splashing and creaking long before we see the boats emerge from the mist. The boats are riding very low in the water as they approach the shore. If there would have been any kind of wind it appears the boats would have been easily swamped by waves. As the fisher men get within shouting distance we ask the question the spectators have asked returning fisherman since the beginning of time, "Did you catch anything?" Knowing that must know nothing about the nature of their labors, Peter simply nods and points to the boat as if to say, "look how low in the water we are riding, what do you think?" The nose of the first boat hits the shore and men leap over the sides into the water, grabbing ropes to heave the craft ashore. They then begin to unload huge baskets filled with fish. This lake is a gift from God we think. Not only is it stunningly beautiful but look at abundance of fish!

This vision of the Garden of Eden, the land of milk and honey, does not define reality however. There is another reality at play. As the fishermen unload their baskets, they place them on carts and donkeys haul the carts to the road. At the intersection of the beach and the road wait the tax collectors flanked by Roman soldiers in body armor and razor sharp weapons. The fishermen begin to unload the baskets off of their carts. For every ten baskets, they unload nine. The tax rate in this land is 90%. The tax rate does not just apply to the fishermen. As we continue up onto the road and head into Capernaum, we notice that farmers are bringing their goods to the market. Before they can enter the market more tax collectors and more armed guards collect 90% of the crops.

In the year 24, King Herod Antipas came up with a plan to become as great as his father. Antipas' father was known as Herod the Great. And even though Antipas was best friends with the emperor, he still had a huge inferiority complex. Imagining his fear at being named "Herod the not as great as his father." Antipas knew that his was considered great because of the stunning building projects he had completed over the course of his lifetime. There was one building project the father had not attempted though, and that was to build a new capitol city. This is how Antipas hoped to be recognized as Herod the Greater. He would build a new capital city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and call it Tiberias. This is why the sea of Galilee is also known as the sea of Tiberias. In order to fund the cost of construction, he taxed his people in subsistence living. They were allowed to keep such a small percentage of the overwhelming abundance of the land that they were always in fear of starving. Many had to sell their family lands and become servants to the new owners. We could not paint a more accurate distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of people if we tried.

News of an alternative reality breaking into the world had reach many of the young people in the region of Galilee. A man named John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness near the river Jordan, about 80 miles south of their homeland. John was baptizing people to prepare them for the arrival of the messiah. Thousands of people were desperate to experience the alternative reality of God, to be freed from the shackles of their slavery to the government; to be freed from the oppressive rule of Rome, to be on hand at the arrival of the Messiah and the made the pilgrimage to hear john firsthand.

John was preaching the good news of an alternative reality, God's kingdom was breaking into the rule of man, and soon this new reality would be ushered in by one so powerful he would not baptize people with water, but with the Holy Spirit. John and Jesus could see this reality and they had dedicated their lives to helping as many people as possible see it as well. John was speaking to Andrew as we listened in. He was becoming animated as he described the nature of the Messiah, then stopped in mid-sentence. His jaw dropped as he pointed, "There he is! Look! Here is the Lamb of God!"

Andrew and his friend looked right past Jesus, scanning the crowd, and we were also doing. Where they asked each other as Jesus continued to walk away. Right there! John said pointing at Jesus' back. Really, we all asked ourselves. That guy? He's a nobody. He doesn't have a

sword. Look at his clothes! He is poorer than we are. He was absolutely nothing to look at, just another face in the crowd. John insisted, look you fools, if you want to meet the Messiah go and talk to him. Get to him before he disappears into the crowd.

Andrew and his friend trotted after Jesus, whispering to themselves back and forth about what they would say. They were both thinking how embarrassing it would be to ask this nobody stranger if he was the messiah and then be laughed at by the stranger and anyone else who hear their nonsense question. They were so deep in their thoughts that they did not notice Jesus had stopped walking and had turned to face him. Before they could stop, they bounced right off of him and totally lost whatever plan they had been forming. Jesus smiled at them and asked what are you looking for? As he spoke to them, the boys looked into his eyes and their worlds began to spin. They felt the ground of their reality begin to slip away as they saw something in the eyes of this man they had never seen before. There is no way they could describe it, for how can you describe what it is like to look into the eyes of the One who is the gateway into an alternative reality. What do you want was the question; an almost nonsensical Where are you staying was the answer.

The more we think about Andrew's response, the more it begins to make sense. Then as now, appearances, what we see on the surface, tend to define our interpretations of reality. Where are you staying, where do you live, from this perspective makes perfect sense. Maybe Jesus is wearing a costume so he can walk amongst the crowds incognito, but if we see his tent, if we see the luxurious living quarters of the coming Messiah, then we will know for sure he is the one. Of course, as you all know, that is not how the kingdom of God works, because it is an alternative reality, existing within the illusion of our perceptions. After spending the evening having Jesus open their eyes to God's reality, the boys ran to find their friends and excitedly tell them that they had in fact encountered the Messiah. Nathaniel's response is classic myopia. Can anything good come from Nazareth? Jesus did not change Nathaniel's mind because he argued with him. Jesus shattered Nathaniel's perspective of reality because Nathaniel experienced the power of God flowing from Jesus. After his eyes were opened, Nathaniel cried, you truly are the messiah. "Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see much greater things than that! Truly I tell you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man. You will see an alternative reality.

For the past 18 months we have been living in a world that stuns and challenges us every day. We probably all know parents who have spent an incredibly exhausting year trying to work from home while also playing the role of teacher. I know people who are essential workers, so their spouses have had to leave their jobs to care for their children. I talked to a new friend this past week who told me she is a hugger, and it feels like the thing that gives her life was removed during COVID. Today is the first day since perhaps March of 2020 that we have been able to worship in this sanctuary. I have talked to people who have told me they are grieving the loss of the way things used to be because they know they will never be the same while they are also grieving the loss of family and friends. The cover of Time magazine this week highlights one of the best professional tennis players in history who refused to play at the French Open

because they insisted she speak at a press conference. She said her anxiety disorder was too severe, and she was not going to put herself through that. She pulled out of the tournament. Her courage at admitting that anxiety landed her on the cover of Time magazine telling the world that it is OK not to be OK today. Now this reality exists. It is just as real as 90% income taxes. But it is not the only reality.

Part of what I feel called to do this morning is to proclaim why I am here. I am called to be a prophet, to speak what I think I hear God telling me to say to our community, and now because of COVID as a televangelist I get to speak to the world. I am a pastor called to care for this community to remind you the God is with you even when God feels so far away. I am also a priest, called to lead us all into worship and relationship with the risen Christ. This morning I am going to close the sermon with a bit of prophecy. Now prophets are not people who predict the future. They are the mouthpiece of God to the best of their ability. They speak what they think they hear God saying. This past Monday God was speaking to me.

Monday was a day off for the staff at Trinity. It was a good day for me to finish setting up my office and hang things on the walls. I knew the hammer tapping nails into the walls would not disturb any. The parking lot was nearly empty except for two cars parked at the north end of the lot. I figured there must be people in the garden so I walked over to meet my first live non-committee members of the congregation. Millie was tending to her plot at the east end of the garden. I walked up to the fence and introduced myself. Her face lit up like the sun at noon. She reached across the fence and said God truly has sent you to meet me, no pastor has ever come to say hello to me in the garden. She introduced herself and I asked her what she was growing. She replied, Oh I'm mostly taking care of the gifts God has given to me. I've planted a few of the plants here but many of them are gifts from God. This one here is a melon of some kind. I can't wait to see how God is going to surprise me. And this plant is Okra. Pastor you are going to need to come over here and watch this Okra. When it blooms the flowers look like they were truly painted by the angels. She went on and on describing each plant and how she was excited to give the produce to the elderly people in her neighborhood. I pointed to a cluster of strawberries and asked Millie if she had planted them. Millie replied, "It does not matter who planted those, strawberries are always a gift from God. I asked Millie if she was a member of the congregation and she said, I am a member of God's universal church and I am your sister in Christ. I have also been part of this garden ministry for some time. She looked to her right and pointed to an empty square of ground and said pastor it feels really good to feed people, how about you take over that patch of empty ground?"

I laughed and thanked Millie for the offer. We shook hands and said we looked forward to seeing each other again. This past week as I have been writing and rewriting this sermon, I realized that the encounter with Millie on Monday was no chance encounter. For those few minutes we were together I had stepped into an alternative reality. The heavens had opened, and I was standing in God's Garden talking to one of the angels who are constantly ascending and descending upon the Son of man.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy One, Creator, Spirit, Magnificence beyond our imaginations and certainly beyond what words are able to describe, we have gathered here together both in this space and across the miles, connected by technology, connected by love, and connected by your Spirit.

We have gathered because you have called us, invited us, invested in us, and inspired us to seek a reality beyond what our senses can describe for us. We are here today because you have invited us to be a church that is an alternative way to live in the world, not an ordinary church which far too often resembles a social club, but a congregation that shows the world that the way of life offered through the norms of society are not the way of life that you created for us to enjoy. We thank you for that offer, we thank you for this opportunity, we thank you for your presence in our lives and in this community. We thank you also for new beginnings. What a joy it is to be a part of Trinity as we relaunch this church post shutdown. We also thank you for new beginnings in our personal lives. For new friendships and relationships. We thank you especially for the new life you have offered Gary and Cathy Gilpin as he recovers from emergency heart surgery.

Today we not only thank you with our words and thoughts, we thank you through our phones. We thank you for allowing us to use the technology you have given to us to share our joys and concerns. In this moment of silence, we thank you by typing out our joys in the comments of this Facebook feed.

Even though we recognize you offer an alternative reality of divine love and grace, we are also creatures who need your help for challenges too great for us to handle on our own. In this moment of silence, we name those areas in our lives in which we need your help.

We give you thanks, O LORD, with our whole hearts; before the gods we sing your praise;
On the day we called, you answered us, you increased our strength of soul.
For though the LORD is high, You regard the lowly; LORD You will fulfill his purpose for us; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands. Amen

