



St. Lydia's Dinner Church  
Epiphany 2  
January 17/18 2021  
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John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus wanted to set out for Galilee, so he found Philip. "Follow me," Jesus said to him. Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the same town as Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the very one described in the Mosaic Law and the prophets—Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth." But Nathanael retorted, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" So Philip told him, "Come and see for yourself." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he exclaimed, "Look! Here is a genuine Israelite; there is no guile in him." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. "Before Philip called you," Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus answered, "You believe, do you, just because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see far greater things than that." And Jesus told him, "Truly, I assure you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Human One."

As I ride the subway to and from Brooklyn in the pandemic era, I have made a point to not get on really crowded trains, or step into cars where people are not wearing masks. If someone gets on my car without a mask, I move away from the person and change cars at the next stop.

A few weeks ago, I had just gotten on the 3 headed south. I was sitting alone at the end of a car listening to a podcast on my headphones. At 96<sup>th</sup> Street, an older man with a cart full of his belongings got on and sat across from me, and he was not wearing a mask. Our eyes met as I immediately stood up and started walking to the other end of the train. I could hear behind me his loud accusations about me, full of expletives about the racist attitudes of white men in Manhattan. At the next stop, I jumped out and scrambled to the next car where everyone thankfully was masked. It all happened so fast, and as I collected myself on the rest of the train ride, the complexity of what unfolded sank in.

I don't know the man, and didn't talk to him, so all I know about him are the bare facts of the encounter, and what I surmise based upon my observations. I will spare you the excruciating tour through all of my thoughts, but I'll say one thing: it was a stark reminder that I can do all the work I want for racial justice and against white supremacy, and I still walk through the world as a privileged white man. I pondered what that elderly man had experienced in his life, and how this brief encounter with me touched pain running to the depths of his being, the pain of his own life, and of his people so long crushed under the boot of white America.

I was tempted to console myself and name all the good things I'm doing, and that we are doing as a congregation. I was tempted to name the long, hard-won progress of electing the first Black woman vice-president, and the first Black senator from Georgia, tasked with leading us beyond the horrors of these past four years. I was tempted to lean into President Obama's favorite quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose 91<sup>st</sup> birthday we celebrate this weekend. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." The quote comes from a sermon given at the National Cathedral just four days before his assassination. As the writer Mychal Denzel Smith says, it is a sentiment that can inspire hope that "the world we seek lies waiting for us, just on the other

side of this hellscape.”<sup>1</sup> But, Smith notes, the sentiment can lead to acquiescing to the status quo since inevitably things will get better, and justice will come.

Smith’s thoughtful article is seemingly written just for me in this moment, a white progressive man trying to assuage my feelings with the promise that racial justice will eventually come, even if right now it feels far away. He notes this quote is actually King’s paraphrase of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist minister, Theodore Parker, who said

*“I don’t pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but a little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it my conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”*

Smith suggests that Parker’s uncertainty about the moral universe does two important things: it makes “his strong faith a necessity,” and a commitment that “only through his own conscience, and thereby his own actions, that justice will be achieved.”

Put back in the context of a very powerful sermon, the words take on a different sense, more exactly the kind of thing Smith suggests. Near the end of his sermon, King says:

*“We’re going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands. And so, however dark it is, however deep the angry feelings are, and however violent explosions are, I can still sing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”*

It is clear from everything King did that winning freedom and justice required making demands, and the deep faith we hold in a God of justice is embodied, incarnate, if you will, in our work for freedom and justice today.

Our story from the Gospel of John narrates Jesus’ call to his disciples Philip and Nathanael as he begins his campaign of freedom and justice, embodying God’s desire for shalom, for peace on earth. It begins with a simple invitation to follow. I love Philip’s response to Nathanael’s tongue and cheek put down of Nazareth, in a sense asking his friend: “Is this a good way, a life-giving way, a way that will actually change things for the better?” And Philip says, “Come and see for yourself.” The call to follow Jesus is to be a follower of the way of justice and peace, to be a follower of the way of shalom, to be a follower of a way that sees in others their humanity, their creature-hood, even as it sees the beautiful distinctiveness and differences we embody.

In the end, I can’t take away the complexity of pain and fear in my encounter on the train. Yet if I really accept the gift and call of Jesus to follow, the way forward makes every day a Martin Luther King day, a day to embody the eternal will of almighty God in our demands for freedom and justice. That the moral universe bends towards justice is the gift that sustains my call to continue, day in and day out, to say “Yes, I will follow.” The work is new every day, and so is the mercy and gift of God whose promise leads us over the stony roads, who has brought us this far along the way.

**We share the sermon at St. Lydia’s...**

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king\\_n\\_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king_n_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4)