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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 17, 2021
John 1:43-51

It's a new church year - the year of the Gospel of Mark. I have been looking forward to this. After Matthew's frequent weeping and gnashing of teeth, Mark is a refreshing change. His is the shortest Gospel, direct and to the point. It moves like a fast-paced novel. I opened the lectionary for this week, only the 2nd Sunday into the Epiphany season, and I found a passage from the Gospel of ... John. Oh John ... so esoteric. His language is poetic and beautiful but it takes some work to get John. His Gospel has been called the "Spiritual Gospel." Jesus is presented in it as the "stranger from heaven."

Right now I don't need a stranger from heaven. I need Jesus right here on this messy earth in the midst of the chaos we have created. So I dug into this passage with some trepidation. But I was surprised by what I found.

We start out with a very earthly Jesus. "Jesus decided to go to Galilee." He could have gone somewhere else, but he made a choice. He had to think about it, plan when he would leave, what route he would take to get there, where he would stay once he got there. We don't get all the details in the passage, but as human beings we know the steps. Very human steps.

Once he gets there, he finds Phillip. We don't know if he went looking for his friend or if he just bumped into him. But it's exactly what we might do if we went to a new city. We would look for someone to connect with. And when Phillip connects with Jesus he introduces him to his friend Nathanael. This is often how it goes for us.

Nathanael is not impressed. Who is this guy from the sticks? Why are you going on about him? That's when things get strange. Jesus seems to know him even though they have never met. And when Nathanael confesses, because Jesus seems to have supernatural knowledge of him, that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel, Jesus ups the stakes. He uses the Hebrew Scriptures to tell Nathanael that he is in fact the Epiphany, the revelation of God on earth. "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Nathanael would have recognized that Jesus was alluding to the story of Jacob's ladder. You might recall that Jacob dreamed that he saw angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. After the dream, Jacob exclaims that the place of this revelation is the house of God and the gate of heaven. Jesus is telling Nathanael that he is the new revelation, the place of God and the gate of heaven.

So, this very human man from Nazareth is also God? Imagine what went through Nathanael's mind at that point. We don't hear how Nathanael responds to this claim, but we know how we respond to it. How can it be? Both God and human? Fully God and fully man? This is the mystery that we profess every week in our worship together. The words flow easily off our tongues, but the mystery is hard to wrap our arms around.

Mystery makes us humans uncomfortable. That's why we stay up late into the night finishing that mystery novel – we need resolution, we need to understand it. Mystery makes us anxious because we aren't in control of it, we don't know what is going to happen next. It's hard to live with things we don't understand so we tend to put things in categories that we can understand. Heaven is about God and religion. It's a spiritual thing that fits in this place we call holy. Our lives, our day-to-day comings and goings fit into an entirely different box. The two

don't meet because they are different things. But what if they did meet? What if heaven isn't just a far-off mysterious place that we will someday see if we keep out of trouble?

This is the invitation in John's Gospel this morning. To come and see Jesus, the gate from heaven. Come and join him in bringing heaven to earth. What is it that Nathanael will see in Jesus? What are these greater things that he promises? Jesus will feed the hungry, heal the sick, comfort the brokenhearted. He will challenge the hypocrisy of his day and call people to truth and reconciliation. He will refuse to judge people based on their work or their economic level or their ethnicity or gender, or skin color. He will invite everyone to God's sumptuous banquet table.

In Jesus we are drawn up and down that ladder to heaven. In Jesus, we begin to grasp the ungraspable. In Jesus, fully human and fully divine, heaven and earth come together. Through him, we have eyes to see beyond ourselves into the deeper mystery of God. We see the promise of God's reign, a world where everybody counts, where there are no divisions between us, no barriers that keep us apart. In Jesus, John's stranger from heaven, who became one of us, we are drawn into God's heavenly vision.

Tomorrow we remember Martin Luther King, Jr., who called on Americans to live out this heavenly vision together. Martin Luther King, as preacher and civil rights activist, had a sense of Jesus as the bridge between heaven and earth. He knew that God's desire for his people was not to let them wait in oppression until they reached a far-off heaven in the sky. For Dr. King, following Jesus meant working to bring God's kingdom to earth so that all of God's people are free to flourish.

We can look to the great names of our tradition, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, for inspiration. We need that inspiration. But it doesn't stop there. We all contribute to the bridging of heaven and earth when we choose, even in our mundane comings and goings, to follow the greater things of Jesus. When we treat the cleaner at our hotel with the same respect and dignity that we would the owner, when we let someone scoot into a line of traffic and look them in the eye and see the person behind the wheel, when we throw extra cans of some of our favorite foods in our shopping cart and imagine the family that will enjoy them, when we live as if all of God's creation is a gift to be cherished. When we do these simple things in love, we bring heaven to earth. When we restore what has been broken among us - broken relationships, unjust systems that lead to economic and educational inequity, breeches of trust and truth. When we do these harder things, we enter into the mystery of Jesus, fully human and fully divine.

So maybe John isn't so ethereal after all. In this new Church year, maybe we need a touch of John's bigger picture to frame the days ahead of us. May we walk with Phillip and Nathanael into this new year where we are invited again to "come and see." As we take up the invitation, may we join Jesus in making the world a more heavenly place.

