
Calling All Disciples of Epiphany Light

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Epiphany 2 – Year B

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Paraphrase, Psalm 19:14)

Calling all disciples of Epiphany light. That's what we're doing here today! Calling all disciples of Epiphany light. Our scriptures and prayers, songs and sermons are all combining to do that here today. It's also the Sunday before our annual observance of the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was himself one of those 'disciples of Epiphany light.' As it happens I'm also teaching black religious studies this semester in my other job as a college professor. That's right: I'm a clergyman with a dual career, as many of you know; but that also involves teaching religion. In that connection I'm going to confide in you a bit of self-promotion that I can't resist at the start of every semester.

Every semester I introduce students to the study of religion in a particular way. It's irresistible because I have the strategic advantage of being able to introduce the field of religious studies by using my own name as a theological name. And why would I not take advantage and deploy my name in this way: starting the semester with a little tutorial that involves a play-on-words: 'Thee,' I say with a little smile, 'Thee is short for *Theo-phus*—and it's a theo-logical name!'

I wish I had time to summarize my mini-tutorial to you, too. But at least I can't resist sharing with you my more humorous turn. Because the Greek word for wisdom—*sophos* or *sophia*—also occurs in that word familiar to all college students, "sophomore." So I go on to have a little fun at the expense of the sophomores in the class.

'Do you know,' I ask the class, 'Do you know the root meaning of the two Greek words in the word, "sophomore?"' Sometimes someone in the class already knows, and so I let them point out that *soph-* comes from *sophos* or *sophia*—again meaning "wisdom" or in this case, "wise," and the root word, *more*, comes from the Greek word for 'moron,' so that the combined meaning is 'wise moron' or 'wise fool.' And then I conclude with the moral of this story: 'So a sophomore is a wise fool—someone in their second year who knows just enough to get into trouble—like a sorcerer's apprentice who hasn't yet learned their teacher's wisdom. And so, I conclude, 'Being a wise fool is a characteristic of sophomores that can apply whether you're in your second year of high school, or your second year of college, or the second year of your term in the U.S. Congress.'

Well, speaking of sophomores and apprentices, today's first reading introduces us to a boy prophet who successfully apprenticed with old Eli in the ancient Israelite temple at Shiloh. In fact, in this reading we get to attend the very tutorial in which the boy Samuel first learned how to receive the word of God as a prophetic word. As he heard a voice calling to him in the night Samuel learned what he would need to know for the rest of his life as a prophet: he learned how to recognize the voice of God. And just as importantly, he learned how to respond as instructed by his teacher, Eli; old Eli, who coached him to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Now right here, if I were teaching my class this semester on Black religious experience, I would identify for students some Black Christians across the generations who have apprenticed themselves to the gospel of Christ. And that leads us most immediately to tomorrow's observance of the life and legacy of Dr. King.

Have you ever wondered how a social prophet like Dr. King emerged from the struggles and challenges faced by a

disadvantaged people? Let me tell you what I know about that emergence from growing up in the same hometown as Dr. King; growing up here in Atlanta. Even as a boy growing up here myself, and experiencing race hatred, prejudice and segregation, I remember hearing, both in church and school, this classic quotation proclaimed to us school children:

I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making *me* hate *him*. [Repeat.]

—Booker T. Washington; quoted in *Charm and Courtesy in Conversation* (1904) by Frances Bennett Callaway, p. 153 http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Booker_T._Washington

Now that's not a quotation from Dr. King (1929-1968) but from our earlier ancestor in black Christian spirituality, Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), the founding president of Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. Speaking as a so-called race leader in the late 1800s and early twentieth century, Washington articulated a feature of black Christianity that I would describe to my students as a 'hate-transcending spirituality.' It was that hate-transcending wisdom that a generation later we can hear in Dr. King's own writings. Consider, for example, this Kingian declaration from 1958 in his book, *Strength to Love*:

To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory." (M.L. King, Jr. *Strength to Love*; 1958)

Now those were the declarations of a visionary prophet, still resonating for us today in more recent times. Yes, and some of those prophetic declarations have been fulfilled in our day when so many U.S. Americans—black and white, native and immigrant, Hispanic and Asian—so many have been won over as allies to support our call for democratic ideals to be upheld across our land, from Ferguson, Missouri to Staten Island, New York; and from Cleveland, Ohio to our own town of Atlanta. But let's conclude with one more example of this gospel ethic in the words of Dr. King. Writing also in 1958, in an essay called, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," King boldly declared:

We must have compassion and understanding for those who hate us. We must realize so many people are taught to hate us that they are not totally responsible for their hate. But we stand in life at midnight; we are always on the threshold of a new dawn. ("Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" in *Strength to Love*; 1958)

Christian friends, today's scriptures combine with prophetic voices in our own time to help us observe this church season of Epiphany—Epiphany, the preeminent season of holy light in our Christian year. However many places of darkness still cover our land, and no matter how much midnight still covers our world, let us declare and follow our Lord as if we too are standing, as King proclaimed, "always on the threshold of a new dawn." And so in our own time may we may experience the fulfillment of 'new dawns'—just as our ancestors and others who have gone before us in faith would recognize and acknowledge such fulfillment of prophecy if they were to appear among us here today.

And now let us sum up all these declarations and affirmations in the words of our collect appointed for this second Sunday after the Epiphany. Please join me now in praying together our opening prayer, our Collect appointed this Second Sunday after the Epiphany. The Lord be with you... Let us pray...

The Collect of the Day

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ *is* the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and forever. Amen.