

About 4PM

Season of Reconciliation

January 19, 2014

Gordon Wiersma

Texts: - John 1 & Isaiah 49

So I'm reading through the story from John's Gospel – about John the Baptist and his disciples, and how John's disciples become Jesus' disciples – one of the disciples being Andrew, whose brother is Simon AKA Cephas AKA Peter. To me it's a very familiar story, but whether familiar to you or not I trust it's pretty interesting, setting the stage for Jesus' ministry ahead. But, I'm reading through the story, and THIS is what I notice: when these disciples of John become disciples of Jesus, talking with Jesus and staying with him, the story says this: '...it was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon...' What? What the world is that detail doing there? 'It was 4pm'? – gospel stories don't include details like that...is the story going to also say it was partly cloudy, a bit windy, and Andrew was wearing a practical but sporty brown tunic? ☺ No, if there is a detail like this, it must be important – so I looked...no commentaries seem to think it is important. I did find that the Greek is literally 'the 10th hour', meaning the 10th hour from sunrise – which works out to about 4 in the afternoon – 'about 4pm'. So what in the world is that detail doing there? Well, with all due respect to the commentators, I think it IS important – I think it's fascinating. I think this story is passed on through Jesus' followers, and what remains in it is this little detail that marks it as one of those 'I remember where I was when...' kind of stories. You know what I mean – important events that mark life – a success, a tragedy; a birth, a death; a discovery, a loss – and you can remember the place, the feelings, the time. With this story in John, it is an encounter with Jesus the the

Messiah, and I can hear Andrew telling the story... ‘I remember how Jesus talked with us, and invited us to follow him – it was about 4 o’clock that day – I can still picture it...’ ‘About 4pm’ – I think it reveals the story as the kind of event we know in life – specific moments in time that mark us and define us. Not all good, as I said – not by any means – and I wonder about the ‘where and when’ times in life that mark you...? and, then, what about such a mark of time in meeting Jesus? Now my faith story and the religious tradition Hope Church stands in are not so much in the ‘name the day and time when you came to know Jesus’ sort of tradition. But here this little ‘about 4pm’ detail jumps out, and I’ve found it meaningful to reflect on what this does mean in my faith – which I think is something like this: that in all the moments and times that do mark our lives, I have this mark that defines me too: meeting Christ, Jesus calling me, knowing Jesus. I know it doesn’t happen always or often all at once, a ‘come to Jesus’ moment – but what I hear and feel in this story is the claim, the mark, that is good news to us – that we inherit from this story – all the way from Andrew to us: in our own time, in my life, this is my story, our story, too, of meeting Jesus and believing that in this One is found the way of life.

So hold that thought about that detail from John; and then notice with me something about the passage from the prophet Isaiah. In the midst of this passage, one of the Servant Songs, speaking to the renewal of Israel, this word of God comes: ‘it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up Israel...I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth’. Now this is a passage that has for a long time resonated with me in a profound way – and I hope you hear the power and beauty in it too: the saving power of God not reserved for one people, but through one people given as a light for all. It is one of the defining moments in scripture, expressed in such a compelling way: ‘it is too light a thing...to small a vision...to call you only to help your own; you will be a light to all

– shining God’s saving power to the ends of the earth.’ No limited horizon in this call, but a grand vision...or is it grandiose? As powerful as this calling is, I think it is hard to know what to do with it – to hear it as something other than a grand dream at best or a pipe dream at worst. It is God’s call, but for us trying to figure out our lives from day to day – what could such a grand vision speak to us?

So I’ve been thinking about those 2 things – about how there are particular times and moments in life that mark our lives; and of this call in Isaiah, God’s call to life being part of a grand vision of God’s saving power – wondering what those have to say to each other, or how to bring them together. And it seems to me that on this day in which we give thanks to God for the prophetic ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., that reflecting on his life helps us to do that.

As a leader of the African-American community and civil rights movement, Dr. King knew very well of the ways a person and community can have life marked in debilitating ways – a community and people defined as slave, as lesser-than; lives marked by prejudice, hatred, violence. For the black community there were too many ‘where and when’ moments that marked deep injustice and hopelessness, often at the hands of those who claimed the name Christian. But ultimately Dr. King had a simple, persistent, motivating truth – he had met Jesus, and that was the encounter that marked and shaped his life (he actually met Jesus through a Hindu leader named Gandhi – but that’s another story) – and since he knew Jesus, MLK knew that life was not given to us to be about small things. Dr. King was a prophet to the oppressed that their lives were not marked and defined by their suffering – neither through despair nor through violence; and Dr. King was a prophet to the oppressor that their lives were not found in their privilege – neither in prejudice nor in ignorance. No, when you truly meet Jesus, that is the mark that shapes your life,

and it cannot help but call you to be a part of a grand vision – of a dream – that all people share in the goodness and grace God created us to live in. Dr. King was a grand prophet of a grand dream, speaking to thousands and millions, and a nation and nations – clearly he fits that Isaiah picture better than you or me; but he did so in a way that said to all: your life is not about small things; each person is called to be a part of this dream. Dr. King met Jesus, and that was what he had to say – and even in the tragic death that marked the end of his life, that word could not be silenced.

So that's simply what I invite us to hear together today. In all the 'where and when' moments that mark your life - a tragedy, a success; a birth, a death; a discovery, a loss – be renewed this day in Andrew's story – 'we met Jesus – about 4pm'; in MLK's story as one whose life was marked in meeting Jesus – and hear it as your story too. A meeting which means your life and mine are not about small things – in the day to day, the grind and the distractions, the responsibilities and needs – you are called to be a light. God has decided it is too light a thing for you to live only for yourself – you are part of a broader vision – a dream; you can remember you were told that at about 11:40am. AMEN.