

Epiphany Two B - 1/18/09
St. David's

“The Word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”

It is one of the great understatements in all of the Bible. When the author of the book of Samuel tells us that the word of the Lord was rare, what he is really describing are a people who have lost all hope. He is reporting on a time when the masses no longer felt God's presence in their lives. It is a world where skepticism about God reigns. People no longer believed that God was having a direct impact on their lives. They understand God as the one who might have been a part of their ancient ancestor's lives, but no longer had any direct impact on them. If we didn't know better, you might think the writer was talking about 21st century America.

Then in the Gospel you just heard, Nathanael makes one of the most sarcastic statements in all of the Bible. His friend Philip has just asked him to come check out this guy named Jesus. “You've got to be kidding,” Nathanael insinuates. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Both statements make it clear that, despite what we might think, skepticism and its resulting sarcasm are not inventions of the post-modern era. They apparently existed in 1000 BC in the time of Samuel and Eli as well as the first century AD.

It does seem, however, that we have elevated skepticism in our time to a bit of an art form, doesn't it? We have become so jaded that we use Nathanael's phrase constantly, for anybody and everything. “Can anything good,” we ask, “come out of Hollywood, Detroit, the news media, the Supreme court, Congress, the White House,

the Governor of Illinois, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel, Hamas, Iraq, the Middle East? In Dr. King's letter from a Birmingham jail, we heard the same question asked again about this very institution. "Can anything good come out of the church?"

Now there is nothing wrong with a healthy skepticism. Through it, Eli is able to validate that the voice Samuel hears really is from God, even though no one else is having such experiences. Nathanael uses his skepticism to test the notion that Christ is contained within the person of Jesus. In today's Epistle, Dr. King utilizes skepticism to reveal the fact that the church, and Christians in general, had lost their nerve and desire to stand up against the injustices perpetrated by the society around them.

The problem, as I see it, is when a healthy skepticism evolves into something more acidic. When skepticism moves beyond critical reasoning, it often turns into cynicism. Whereas a skeptic needs solid proof before they will believe, a cynic, as we have come to use the term today, refuses to believe in anything.

Perhaps we do not have a corner on the skepticism market. But we have become the greatest cynics of all time, much more cynical than the people of the first century from whom that word derives. Cynicism runs rampant in our culture. Cynicism is what made us hear about the antics of Governor Blagojevich and conclude that all politicians are corrupt, and in it for their own personal gain. Cynicism is what makes the huge majority of Americans and Europeans hear today's story of God speaking to Samuel and sarcastically remark that only simple minded people could believe such a fairy tale. Cynicism is what makes so many hear today's Gospel and laugh out loud at anyone who could buy into such a ridiculous story. Cynicism is also the reason many

churches and the majority of this country's inhabitants at the time, called The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. a troublemaker and a menace to society. It is the reason those clergymen wrote that letter to King telling him he had overstepped his bounds in coming to Birmingham. Cynicism convinces us that things will never change and the world's problems and injustices must always remain. Cynicism tells us that the word of the Lord is rare in these days, that in fact, it doesn't really exist.

It would seem nearly impossible, therefore, to attempt to announce Epiphany in such a setting. How do you tell the world that the light of Christ is here among us, when cynicism totally and completely obliterates that light? Perhaps the people of 1000 BC felt like God had disappeared from their lives. But the people of 2009 don't believe that God was ever here to disappear. Announcing Christ to such a world is absurd. That will get us nothing but blank stares and eye rolling. Instead, it seems to me that we must begin by attacking cynicism itself. Only by letting go of cynicism, will anyone ever be able to see that, in fact, we have seen glimpses of the kingdom of God. Think of where we are today as a result of that Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. That is the kingdom inbreaking on us. Once we are able to let go of the death grip of cynicism, we can begin to live in hope again. And with hope comes the possibility that God's voice in the world in 2009 is not a fairy tale. And if we can just hear God's word again, we can hear God's call for us in our lives.

Perhaps we can't make people believe in God, but we can give them a glance of the kingdom. And once someone sees a tiny glimpse of justice, a small example of what life would be like if everyone had freedom and dignity, everything can change.

Once beyond cynicism, we can have hope, and once we have hope, we can dare to dream of the world that God calls us to take part in creating.

Tomorrow, we recognize the man in our era who taught us how to let go of our cynicism, who showed us that the kingdom is within our reach, if we only we allow ourselves to believe and to dream.

Because Dr. King would not allow himself to be cynical, he heard God's voice when it came. This is how he described his Samuel moment, his Nathanael moment. "After a particularly strenuous day, I had settled in bed at a late hour. My wife had already fallen asleep and I was about to doze off when the phone rang. An angry voice said, 'Listen nigger, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week, you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.' I hung up, but I could not sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of the bed and began to walk the floor. I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, with my courage almost gone, I determined to take the problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that night are still vivid in my memory. 'I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now, I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength or courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face them alone.'

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before.

It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me an inner calm. Three nights later our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life."

It is not just hope and the ability to believe and dream that we get when we are able to let go of our cynicism. We can hear the God we were not able to hear before. In addition, we are also given strength. And it is through that strength that we are able to help bring about the kingdom of God.

During the course of my own lifetime, there has never been a moment more important than this one for Christians to realize what we must do. Our world is perched on the precipice of environmental catastrophe that threatens to eliminate all of us. Our economy worsens by the day. War rages all over the Middle East. Hot spots around the world are ready to explode in violence. Millions face extreme poverty, dying of preventable diseases and starving to death. Conditions in Sudan and other parts of Africa continue to worsen for innocent people. America continues to hold prisoners in camps for seven years now without so much as a trial. How did we allow things to get to this place? It is the disease of cynicism, the thought process that tells us there is nothing we can do, the disease that takes away our God, that takes away God's call to

do something about this and that takes away our hope that anything can possibly improve. But beloved, we can change this. We, more than anyone else, know how to end this rampant cynicism. We can return hope to the masses. We can help them dream again. And we all know that it is in the dream that God's kingdom comes.

On the day after The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s holiday, we will inaugurate a man who was molded out of the same clay. Like Dr. King, Barack Obama also escaped the sickness of cynicism. He did so the same way Dr. King did...through his faith community. It was the people of his church that taught him to let that cynicism go. That is what allowed Mr. Obama to hear God's call to him, just like Samuel did, just like Nathanael did. It is what brought him to this Tuesday.

Mr. Obama's denomination believes that this is a central focus of the church today. In fact, when you go to any of their churches, visit their website, or see any materials they have produced, it is always the first thing you see. "God is still speaking." Mr. Obama truly believes our lessons from Samuel and the Gospel of John. Even more importantly, he knows that God is still speaking to us today.

But if Mr. Obama is going to be successful in living into God's dream, we, you and I, must be the ones that convince the world that it is true. By letting go of our cynicism, all of us can hear God speaking, and when that happens, anything is possible. When we all begin hearing God's word, we will also hear God's dream, not just for us, but for all.

When that happened to me, it convinced me to stop throwing my hands up in

despair and realize that if God really is here, we can bring about the kingdom. It kicked off a series of events that brought me here to you. It allowed me to articulate for myself and then for you how I understand the dream.

It is a dream that one day we will awake to find a world where people honor the sacredness of all of God's creation, where all God's creatures are given honor and dignity. It is a dream for a world energy policy that considers the rights of the earth and demands respect for the integrity of God's land, as we search for renewable sources of energy from the sun and the wind that God provides. It is the dream of an economy that is centered on creating these renewable sources of energy, while simultaneously providing jobs that uplift people's souls and renews their minds.

It is a dream of a world where every child has enough food to eat, where extreme poverty is wiped out forever. It is a dream of a world where medicine reaches every human on earth that has a preventable disease. It is the dream of a world that will not tolerate the degradation of a single human being, where the life of an African in Darfur is just as precious as that of our own children.

That dream envisions a world where Muslims and Jews stand hand in hand with one another instead of blowing each other up. It imagines a world where we respect one another in our difference and celebrate that difference. It is a world that honors the religious significance of a land revered by multiple faith traditions, that allows each of those traditions to enter those sacred places without fear.

It is a dream where all the Guantanos of the world are shut down forever,

where torture of another human being is a thing we only read about in ancient history books.

That dream is of a world where the Civil rights movement expands to include every person who has been rejected and abused by the world in any way. It is a dream of a world where Buddhists are allowed to return to their homeland, where Hindus and Muslims live next to one another and learn from each other, where Christians stop once and for all fighting with each other over dogma and begin working together to bring all this about.

The dream envisions that time when proper medical care is available to all of the world's people and that none of us need worry anymore about becoming destitute, should we become ill. That dream also imagines an America where every natural disaster is met with immediate aid and compassion, a land where we never, ever again allow a repeat of what happened to the great people of New Orleans.

It is a dream of a world where all people realize that every single one of us, Muslim and Buddhist, red and white, gay and straight, Pakistani and Indian, evangelical and mainline, human and animal, are all inextricably linked in a single destiny, where we will all thrive together or we will all die together.

Beloved, the time has come, the moment is at hand to make the dream come true. We are on the very precipice of the kingdom of God. It is there. Samuel saw it. Nathanael saw it. Dr. King took us to it. Barack Obama is ready to lead us through it. It is up to you and me. Let the cynicism go. See the kingdom. Hear God's voice.

Follow God's call. Live the dream. Let us make it happen together. Amen.