**Come and See** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake  
Second Sunday after Epiphany The House of Hope Presbyterian Church   
Luke 1:43-51 Saint Paul, Minnesota  
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Several years ago Jim Friedrich, an Episcopal Priest, taught a course last on *“Jesus and the Movies”* at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. The class examined 19 feature films on Jesus, made between 1912 and 2014, through the lenses of biblical criticism, Christology, film theory, and cultural contexts.

But they also considered their own personal perspectives on the protagonist of *“the greatest story ever told.”* Friedrich asked his students: What influences have shaped our own images of Jesus? How do we picture Jesus? What do we expect him to do? How do we expect him to be? How is our understanding of Jesus enlarged, challenged, confirmed, contradicted, or disappointed by what we see on the screen?

Robert Powell, whose [portrayal of Jesus in Franco Zefferelli’s Jesus of Nazareth (1977)](http://www.imdb.com/media/rm2457643008/tt0075520?ref_=tt_pv_md_3) was generally well received by the public, said some years later, *“No one can play Jesus. Not really.”* And many critics have agreed. The casting of boyish [heartthrob Jeffrey Hunter](https://jimfriedrich.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/jeffrey-hunter-jc.png) (who was actually 33 when he played the part) elicited sneers of *“I Was a Teenage Jesus*.” [Max von Sydow](http://www.imdb.com/media/rm740787456/tt0059245?ref_=ttmd_md_pv), praised by some for restoring virility to the role, was ripped by others for *“an aphorism-spouting, a Confucius-like edge to his speech, an overtone of pomposity.”* [Jesus Christ Superstar’s Ted Neely](http://www.imdb.com/media/rm2621942528/tt0070239?ref_=ttmd_md_nxt) was dismissed as *“a droopy little fellow with sad eyes and long hair, followed by nondescript young people without any particular place to go.”* And [Willem Dafoe’s troubled and uncertain Jesus](http://entertainment.time.com/2009/04/10/top-10-jesus-films/slide/the-last-temptation-of-christ-1988/) caused NPR’s Tom Shales to say that *“this Jesus wonders, wonders, wonders who—who wrote the book of love?”*

But according to Friedrich, no actor has to be the Jesus, and no single film needs to be definitive. They only need to show us the old, old story in some fresh way, to reveal some dimension we might otherwise have missed. But any claim to have finally gotten it right would be idolatry. As Rowan Williams (the former Archbishop of Canterbury) has noted:

*If you think representation is copying or reproducing, quite clearly, there is no way you can do this as a religious believer. Not even if you think you are reproducing what Jesus looked like when he was on earth. If on the other hand you think ‘I need to find some kind of vehicle which will put me in touch with the action that underlies and sustains these events,’ then of course you won’t necessarily look for a realistic picture. … No, you don’t want to represent just the human facts, nor do you want to take refuge in abstract representations … you are put in touch with something, but you mustn’t think it’s a copy.*

So the actors and filmmakers are freed of the burden of factual replication. They merely have to put us in touch with that certain something contained in the Jesus story. And in provoking our own responses, both positive and negative, they make us reexamine the nature and history of our own images and ideas for Jesus.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I think this is interesting because a lot of the same questions about Jesus’ identity are raised in our Gospel reading from John 1 this morning, where a person named Nathanael has an unusual encounter with an enigmatic Jesus of Nazareth.

Let’s set the scene:

After meeting Jesus, an excited Philip seeks out Nathanael to tell him they have found the one *“about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”* But Nathanael’s response is not very promising.

*“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* he responds skeptically. It’s true: Nazareth was not much as a place of origin for a messiah. But Philip isn’t worried about the setting; in fact, he seems unperturbed by Nathanael’s lack of enthusiasm. *“Come and see,”* is all he says. He offers no defense of Nazareth, just an invitation to a personal encounter.

As the account unfolds, the interaction becomes increasingly peculiar. Nathanael accepts Philip’s invitation to *“come and see”* but it is Nathanael who is seen. We might imagine that his skepticism offers him a certain protection, a sense of the upper hand, when he experiences an encounter with the unknown and the seemingly inappropriate. But whatever Nathanael’s thoughts are as he arrives on the scene, he immediately becomes disoriented. Bewilderment replaces skepticism. Jesus sees him and makes this strange comment about him: *“Behold, here is an Israelite indeed, one in whom is no guile!”* (no deceit). A stranger’s introduction does not usually include sweeping pronouncements about one’s life.

Nathanael is puzzled and responds; How do you know me? Who have you been talking to? Who has been talking about me? With an explanation that leaves the reader possibly more puzzled than Nathanael, Jesus answers, *“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”*

These words elicit a strong response from the truthful, though initially skeptical, Nathanael. Quickly abandoning his posture of doubting inquirer, he proclaims, *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.”* This response includes an equally surprising set of pronouncements for an introductory encounter. From where did this confession, this insight, come? Nothing but an encounter with the divine could explain their mutual recognition and this unusual interchange of knowing and being known, seeing, and being seen.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Knowing and being known, seeing, and being seen. The Gospel writer, John, was a Jewish mystic—and this is a mystical story.

This, of course, is Martin Luther King, Jr., weekend, and he, like Jesus, elicited a variety of different responses from people.

The time is 1955. The place: Montgomery, AL. The issue is forced segregation on city buses. Local pastors are gathered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church--*strategizing.* Rosa Parks has recently been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white person. Her trial will be coming soon.

A lot of ideas go back and forth, but nothing clear emerges. *Until--the most unlikely thing.* The young pastor of the church, new to town, unknown to the city fathers (and, some say, not yet intimidated by them)--a guy in his 20's--raises his hand. The boycott has a leader.

Young Rev. King, it is. A newcomer to this circle, but like Nathanael, he has this experience in Jesus of the reign of God come near and is now an ambassador of that place--that meeting of heaven and earth - inviting others to walk on that street where the reign of God has gotten a foothold.

Most unexpected!

Many years later, now very well known, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would describe his glimpse of what it looks like when the reign of God comes near. He said:

*". . . one day (he said) every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low . . . and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.*

*". . . one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."[[3]](#footnote-3)*

With Martin Luther King's words, through his actions, according to his dream, we could see it, too. Because he had raised his hand, had stepped up to walk in that place where heaven and earth come near. Because he stepped up to walk with Jesus, it turned out that *"one day"* was unexpectedly closer than we thought.

But it's hard to follow Jesus to those unexpected places sometimes. Too often the Reign of God enters our world with a cost.  Dr. King knew this, too.

From the unlikely location of the Birmingham jail, he wrote about a letter he had just received from a local white Pastor urging caution, who said:

*"All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but. . . The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth."*

Dr. King responded: *"Such an attitude stems . . . from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually . . ."* he said, *"Human progress . . . comes through the tireless efforts of (persons) willing to be co-workers with God . . ."*

*". . . Early Christians entered a town . . . in the conviction that they were 'a colony of heaven,' called to obey God . . . Small in number, they were big in commitment . . . By their effort and example they brought an end to . . . ancient evils . . ."[[4]](#footnote-4)*

" . . . The time is always ripe to do right."[[5]](#footnote-5)

Martin Luther King, who we celebrate this weekend, helped a whole generation see where the ways of heaven begin to get an unlikely foothold on this earth. He helped us remember that walking with Jesus means working for justice--revealing in our midst already a world where love reigns, a realm of God's shalom--of wholeness--where nothing's broken and no one's missing, where a table is spread, and all are welcome.

Karl Barth is supposed to have said, *"When you preach, you've got to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."* He was right. The call of Nathanael reminds us. When we walk with Jesus, we walk in those unlikely places where heaven and earth come near. In this fragmented world, we represent God's reign gaining a foothold here already, and our actions need to show it.

An act of simple hospitality in the midst of want, a hand raised to volunteer for leadership in a community witness, a tent pitched in a city park--all moments, so often unexpected--where the reign of God comes near, where we catch a glimpse of a time and place where nothing's broken and no one's missing, and a table is spread for all God's children.[[6]](#footnote-6)

May it be so.

Let us pray:

Dear God,

Thank you for Nathanael's call and witness. Thank you for the witness of Martin Luther King, Jr., and all others who have been willing to walk with Jesus in that challenging place where heaven and earth come near. Give us the ears to hear the call, eyes to glimpse your reign among us, and the courage to respond and hit the street with you.  In Jesus' name. AMEN.

1. Jim Friedrich, *Ten Questions to Ask about Your own Picture of Jesus,* The Christian Century, February 14, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Christine D. Pohl, *Surprise Encounter,* The Christian Century, January 10, 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Luther King, Jr. *"I Have a Dream,"* Speech. August 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martin Luther King, Jr. *"Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"* April 1963 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sharon E. Watkins, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet,* Day 1, January 15, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)