

SERMON TITLE: "Come and See"

SERMON TEXT: John 1:35-39a, 43-51

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: January 14, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

Note that the superscript numbers refer to numbers of the PowerPoint slides that go with this sermon.

## **INTRODUCTION**

<sup>1</sup>I've always been fond of this scripture in which first John the Baptist and then Jesus and Philip are inviting others to join them in checking out what Jesus was doing. "Come and see," they say. But there's something else going on there too. Whenever I read John 1, I can hear Nathanael's voice coming across as an accusatory and prejudicial smear. When Philip invited Nathanael to come and see Jesus, we can imagine Nathanael vocalizing an unappreciative, "Humph!" Why bother? he thinks, as he puts his objection into the rhetorical question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nathanael's certainty that nothing good comes from a particular place and people reminds me of when I was a kid growing up in northwestern Montana. People there used to tell North Dakotan jokes. You've heard all those jokes before, but maybe they were directed at some other group deemed inferior. Today we're all more aware than we used to be that it isn't right to lump categories of people together and speak badly of them or treat them poorly. But I suspect we still do a lot more of that than we should.

<sup>2</sup>Tomorrow is the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and that reminds us of the challenge to strive for better human relations. So, for today's sermon, <sup>3</sup>I want to share with you what I saw and learned last week when I went on a Civil Rights Spiritual Pilgrimage in Montgomery, Alabama. Like John, Jesus, and Philip, I'm inviting you to open your heart and mind to new possibilities. I'm inviting you to "come and see."

## **1--BACKGROUND**

<sup>4</sup>First, let me show and tell you a little bit about our group. There were twelve of us United Methodist clergy and laity from the Mountain Sky Conference. We stayed in a hotel in Montgomery, <sup>5</sup>and we very much enjoyed our tour guide Jake. Jake is 71 years old, and he grew up around Montgomery and had personal experience in much of what he showed and told us. Even as Jake informed us about particular events that happened with particular people in particular places, however, he wanted us to realize something very important: <sup>6</sup>“Nothing happened just that day.” There was always a lead up and a follow up of causes and effects.

<sup>7</sup>So, the first place Jake took us was where Market Street met the Alabama River. Here was where slaves from Africa were shipped through the Gulf of Mexico and into the city of Montgomery. It was called Market Street in part because that’s where the slave market was. <sup>8</sup>At the start of the Civil War, there were more slaves in Montgomery than most other cities of the South. <sup>9</sup>In the counties around Montgomery, a lot of cotton was grown. Our guide Jake showed us some fields where he himself picked cotton as a child. Now those fields are harvested by machines, but during the years of hand-picked cotton, the virtually-free labor of slaves drove the economy of the region.

So it’s no wonder that the White southerners did everything in their power to keep Blacks enslaved. <sup>10</sup>Montgomery was at the center of all that, as it became the capital of the Confederacy. This picture shows the house where Confederate President Jefferson Davis lived.

<sup>11</sup>Even after the Civil War ended and slaves were officially emancipated, White folks resisted mightily in the South. They used their power to keep Black people subservient. While the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave Blacks their freedom, it didn’t protect those who were accused of a crime. Thus began the practice of arresting Blacks under false or much-inflated pretenses, so their slave labor as prisoners could continue to finance governments, plantations, and corporations.

<sup>12</sup>An alternative to arresting Blacks was lynching them and using the threat of lynching to keep them obedient to the will of Whites. This is the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery. <sup>13</sup>Each column represents a county and the names of persons who were lynched there. It's hard to show you in one or even several pictures what this memorial is like because it's so big. It represents 4400 people who were lynched between the end of the Civil War and 1950. That 4400 is just the number who have been verified. Undoubtedly there were hundreds and maybe thousands more. <sup>14</sup>If you think lynchings only happened in the South, here's a column that lists states in which five or less verified lynchings occurred. Utah is at the bottom. Beyond these columns that hang like martyrs from trees <sup>15</sup>is another set of rectangular boxes that are symbolic of caskets. There I found this Utah box with two names, one lynched in 1883 and the other in 1925. All these tortured lynchings were acts of terrorization against a people to try to keep them obediently in their place.

<sup>16</sup>That's some of the background that leads up to the other events that I'm now going to show and tell. For those who thought the Blacks were out of line or pushing too hard or too fast, it's important to remember that <sup>17</sup>"Nothing happened just that day." After enduring centuries of slavery and another century of Jim Crow laws, there were more than enough reasons why Blacks were justified in seeking their civil rights as they did.

## **2—ROSA PARKS AND MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT (1955)**

<sup>18</sup>So, now I invite you to come and see some of the well-known events of the Civil Rights movement. This is a central plaza where the Montgomery Bus Boycott story began on December 1, 1955. <sup>19</sup>In a sewing shop close by, Rosa Parks finished her day's labor and then stood on the curb to catch her bus ride home. Once on the bus, Rosa walked past the front seats that were reserved for white people only and took her seat in the first row that was designated for "Colored" people. All was fine until the bus stopped in front of the <sup>20</sup>Davis Theatre (as in Confederacy President Jefferson

Davis). A performance had just ended, and the bus was suddenly crowded with white people. Because there weren't enough seats in the white section, the bus driver ordered Rosa Parks to stand up. When she refused to be treated this way, the bus driver called the police. Rosa was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. <sup>21</sup>This museum across the street from the Davis Theatre honors Rosa Parks for her courageous and purposeful refusal.

A friend bailed Rosa out of jail that evening of December 1, 1955. Word of Rosa's arrest quickly spread through the Black community, and <sup>22</sup>on Sunday night, December 4, a mass meeting was held at the Holt Street Baptist Church. The people who gathered there elected the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the new pastor of <sup>23</sup>Dexter Ave. Baptist Church, to be their leader. <sup>24</sup>Plans were made that all Blacks should boycott the Montgomery city buses the next day. They vowed to walk, carpool, or use Black-owned taxis. They distributed 35,000 flyers urging Blacks to participate in the boycott. Since Blacks typically paid 75% of the bus fares, the bus company would feel the pinch.

<sup>25</sup>The success of that one-day refusal to ride turned into a 381-day boycott with nearly 100% participation by Black folks during all that time. The boycott came to an end on Dec. 20, 1956, after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against bus segregation. <sup>26</sup>I'm sure there were many Whites and Blacks who had wondered if anything good could come out of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. But the answer was, yes: the end of segregated seating on city buses.

### **3—FREEDOM RIDERS (1961)**

<sup>27</sup>Of course, for each victory in the courts, Whites put up resistance in practice. Five years after the Supreme Court ruled against segregation on buses, Whites in the South were still enforcing segregation in many bus stations and the cafes, restrooms, and water fountains in those stations. The Black folks even had to enter the stations through a different door, purchase their tickets at a separate counter, and wait for the bus in a different area.

<sup>28</sup>So, in May 1961, a group of Black and White young adults trained in non-violent methods decided to test the desegregation laws by riding Greyhound and Trailways buses from Washington DC to New Orleans. These Freedom Riders traveled fairly well <sup>29</sup>until they arrived in Alabama where they were met by a mob of Klansmen, many still wearing their Mother's Day Sunday church clothes. Their violent tactics included slashing tires and firebombing one bus with the riders still on it. When the Freedom Riders exited their buses, they were beaten.

<sup>30</sup>US Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy intervened and provided an escort of the buses from Birmingham to Montgomery. But the Highway Patrol abandoned the buses at the Montgomery city limits, where city police should have taken over. Unfortunately, the city police did nothing, <sup>31</sup>and a violent mob met the Freedom Riders at this Montgomery bus station and beat them with baseball bats and pipes. Ambulances refused to take the victims to the hospital, and hospitals refused to treat those who got other rides. <sup>32</sup>Eventually the riders made their way to First Baptist Church, pastored by the Rev. Ralph Abernathy. By the next evening, 1500 Blacks, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, had gathered at the church, and a mob of 3000 whites surrounded them. The Blacks inside the church made phone calls and appealed to President John F. Kennedy, who put pressure on the governor of Alabama to calm the violence. He finally did that by calling in the Alabama National Guard.

<sup>33</sup>As the buses of Freedom Riders continued into Mississippi, these struggles continued, and many of the Riders were thrown in jail. Whenever the number of Freedom Riders ran low because they were too badly beaten or held in jail, new recruits took their places to keep moving forward and pressing for the desegregation of interstate travel.

<sup>34</sup>With all the violence inflicted, a whole nation watching on television probably wondered if anything good could come out of the Freedom Riders' efforts in 1961. Again, the answer was yes, when finally, in November 1961, the federal law was changed so that "passengers were permitted

to sit wherever they pleased on interstate buses and trains; ‘white’ and ‘colored’ signs were removed from the terminals; racially-segregated drinking fountains, toilets, and waiting rooms serving interstate customers were consolidated; and the lunch counters began serving all customers regardless of race.” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom\\_Riders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_Riders))

#### **4—VOTING RIGHTS MARCH (1965)**

<sup>35</sup>The next events I want you to come and see are the Voting Rights Marches of March 1965. Our group walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, which is about a one-hour drive west of Montgomery. On that trip, we learned that the events of that month were most immediately stimulated by <sup>36</sup>the beating and shooting death of Baptist Deacon Jimmie Lee Jackson by local police. Jackson and some other members of his family had all tried, over many years, to register to vote. They had always been thwarted by rules designed to keep Blacks from exercising that basic constitutional right. The police knew that Jackson and others had been planning voter registration efforts, and that’s why he was killed.

<sup>37</sup>So, the Black people of Selma gathered at Brown’s Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and decided that on Sunday, March 7, after worship, they would begin marching toward the Alabama state capitol in Montgomery. <sup>38</sup>That march was led by Rev. John Lewis and included around 600 people. Unfortunately, as they crossed over the top of Edmund Pettus Bridge, they saw that there was a stand of officers on the other side. <sup>39</sup>As the Black people proceeded, the police beat them badly and many were seriously injured.

<sup>40</sup>After they retreated, Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Selma from Georgia and helped plan a new strategy. In two days, they held another March. They called it “Turnaround Tuesday,” as they decided they would march to the far side of the bridge and kneel in prayer. That way they could test the police again to see what they would do. On Turnaround Tuesday, 2500 people successfully marched to Edmund Pettus Bridge and then returned home. But, later that night, Klansmen beat

three ministers who had traveled there to support the cause. Rev. James Reeb died in the hospital on March 11.

<sup>41</sup>That, then, stirred further sympathies across the nation, and motivated the Selma activists even more. So, back at the church, they carefully planned and organized so that they had the marching permits, volunteers, and resources they needed. <sup>42</sup>On Sunday, March 21, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and thousands of others set out on a five day march all the way to Montgomery. They had camps arranged along the way where they had permission to stay overnight. They had cooks and portable toilets and all the logistics they needed. Not everyone marched the entire route. Some, like our tour guide Jake who was only 12 years old at the time, only marched along the route one day. <sup>43</sup>But when the marchers arrived at the state capitol steps in Montgomery, they were 25,000 strong. There, on March 25, they made their point that Blacks deserved to have voting rights.

<sup>44</sup>With all the beatings and deaths, no doubt there were people both White and Black who wondered if anything good could come out of those marches in the month of March 1965. But the answer was, yes, because five months later, in August 1965, the U.S. Supreme Court passed the Voting Rights Act that did away with Jim Crow laws of racial discrimination and allowed Blacks to register and vote.

## **CONCLUSION**

<sup>45</sup>There's so much more I could show and tell you. But maybe that's enough to give you the general idea. Like John the Baptist, Jesus, and Philip who wanted others to come and see the wonderful things Jesus was doing to improve life for the oppressed, we today are also called to come and see what has been done and what more we can do as Jesus' people. If we pay attention to the news, we know that the struggles for racial equality and civil rights are far from over. May we who come and see also be willing to go and do.