

“How do you know me?”

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1 Samuel 3:1-10 & John 1:43-51

MLK Weekend | January 11, 2024

“...Even the universe is telling us that we can never get too far/From the place that has created us./How there is always a streak of our past trailing close behind us..../We bring a part of where we are from to every place we go.”

We heard this poem, “Meteor Showers” by Clint Smith, in its entirety as our Call to Worship for today’s service. Clint Smith, author, podcaster, historian, activist, has made a career out of studying education, slavery, social systems, race and anti-Black racism, and the prison industrial complex in the United States. For Smith’s PhD dissertation from Harvard Graduate School of Education, he interviewed twenty-seven folks who had been sentenced to juvenile life without parole, meaning that they were convicted as minors to spend the rest of their lives in prison.

Yes, Clint Smith is an esteemed, educated, award-winning figure whose prolific work has challenged and motivated and moved readers and listeners. But, what if I also told you that Clint Smith is a father, a survivor of Hurricane Katrina, a big professional soccer fan, a Teacher of the Year in a Maryland high school, a poet of endings and sunsets and growing up, and a graduate of Davidson College, my and Maggie’s alma mater? Something I admire most about Clint Smith is how he can weave his past and personal details of his life into his poetry, his non-fiction, and his public persona. “Where he is from,” as Smith may say, does not detract from his work. But, rather, the details of his life are threads of the larger narratives he tells—the narratives in which we, as a society, live and breathe, and the narratives that shock and horrify and compel and soothe and make us sad and make us laugh and, most importantly, make us hope. He is a storyteller, weaving his life with our own.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of John, we hear the disciple Nathanael of Cana ask Jesus this question: “How do you know who I am?” What is Jesus’s response? He says, “Before

Philip even went to call you, while you were sitting under the fig tree, *I saw you.*” *I saw you*, Jesus says. And, the Gospel reading couples with our Hebrew Bible reading from 1 Samuel. God calls young Samuel three times by name. God calls Samuel the boy just before he becomes Samuel the prophet, before Samuel is called the Seer a few chapters later. We hear from Scripture, “In those days, the voice of God was rarely heard—prophecy was uncommon.” Yet, God sees Samuel and calls him into discipleship.

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“How do you know who I am?”

“We bring a part of where we are from to every place we go.”

“I see you. I call you by name not once but three times.”

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On MLK weekend each year, we are called to reflect on our lives within the beautiful and maddening and tragic and hopeful and lovely quilt of humanity. How do we spend our time? How do our actions engender good in this world—additive, not extractive? Whose lives matter to us? How can peace and service be not just a weekend-long thought exercise, but rather a lifelong promise? How can we more often and more deeply see the humanity of our siblings?

When I was thinking about MLK and reading through our Scripture readings, I kept thinking of the word *legacy*. What is the legacy we—I—want to impart on this world? How do I want to be remembered?

As you well know, MLK was a magnificently talented orator and storyteller, his life intersecting with our own collective experience. And, here’s why: writers like MLK, like Clint Smith, and like the authors of the Bible, invite their audience to see them vulnerably, wholly, their past blending into their present into their future, inseparably so, as they speak with conviction, truth, and revelation. And, in doing so, they, too, invite us into the vulnerable wholeness of being seen—our humanity awaiting embrace, the Spirit’s spark of divinity inside us awaiting kindling.

We are all prophet, weeping woman, hermit, betrayer, instigator, peacemaker, dancer to David's lyre—the parts we love and the parts we love less of ourselves merged into who we are today. Remember, there are so many things the world wants to know about you, that God already knows about you and loves about you. If the world could know just one small, strong, imperfect thread in your life's tapestry, what would it be? What would you share? Could you let yourself be seen? Is there a chance you could see yourself mirrored in another?

May God's love overcome our discomfort with loving ourselves and loving others wonderfully and fearfully. May God call us into being with ourselves and with others. May we embrace the powerful and mystifying truth of vulnerability. May we share, may we see. Amen.