

Pastor Frank Espegren

Sermon for 2nd Sunday after Epiphany – January 17, 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51 – “The Word of the Lord Is Rare in Those Days”

Grace and peace to you this day from God our Loving Parent, and from the One Who Is Our Way and our Truth and our Life, Jesus Christ, our Savior & Lord. Amen. After attending seminary in Berkeley in a mid-lifecareer change in the late 1990's, but before I was ordained, then Bishop Robert Matthias granted me sacramental license to serve as the Interim Pastor at Paradise Lutheran Church in the since fire-ravaged town of Paradise, California. I was done with my studies, but honestly, still very much learning what it meant, and took, to be a pastor, and especially, a preacher. One day in the receiving line at the sanctuary door (remember those days), I was met by a then regular attendee of Paradise Lutheran Church, a retired Missouri Synod Lutheran Pastor, Carl Berner. I could feel Carl's presence seething his way up the line. And when he finally reached me, Carl blurted out words that, up to that point, I am not sure I had ever heard come from the lips of a pastor, and definitely loud enough to be heard by the other parishioners around us, “Blankety blank it Frank, I came this morning to hear the Gospel, and you didn't preach it. The Gospel Frank, I need the Gospel!” There's more to that story of course, but I must say that when I left Paradise Lutheran 15 months after I got there, and now 20 years ago,

the most treasured gift I received was a letter from Pastor Carl Berner, thanking me for the work I had done and that I was rounding out to be a pretty good pastor and preacher! Yes, I have saved that now 20 year old letter, and before Sundays in such times as we are in, when I am tempted to veer from my call, scream how I am feeling, short-arm it & offer you only a little self-help advise, or tell you what to think, or what I believe you should do; instead, I read Pastor Berner's letter, take a deep breath, and remember, "Preach the Gospel Frank!" because you, because I, need it.

In the week we have just had in this country and in the days ahead, it is obvious that we have a lot of work to do as Americans, a lot to ponder, consider, and act upon. As Americans, we must do our jobs. But here's the deal People of God. We have another allegiance beckoning us to listen. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, which admittedly has been and still is, corrupted and misinterpreted and wrongly used to justify offense over the years; it is the Gospel that shines into and through this moment, that guides us into all truth, whether we are ready for it, comfortable with it, can stand it, or not. It doesn't negate our calling as citizens. Rather, this higher calling of following Jesus, informs it, informs everything in our lives.

For the Gospel is not theoretical. It is not irrelevant, or impotent to the happenings and matters of the day. God's word is to be proclaimed honestly, and with power, and truth, into our circumstances, which, amazingly, for us, now include the overrunning of our United States Capitol by a seditious mob seeking to alter the outcome of an American election. The Gospel must speak into a moment in which we are dying in record numbers because of a pandemic and our anemic response to it. The Gospel must be spoken into the real circumstances of parents and young people who are dealing with difficulty and uncertainty, trials and tribulations, everywhere they turn. I know because I was part of a Zoom Youth meeting and witnessed firsthand the ridiculously high stress level of our parents; the events at the United States Capitol being just the very last thing to almost overflow their banks of amazing parental strength. They are hanging in there, our parents and kids, by a fingernail. That is the truth.

The Gospel must be proclaimed even as we wonder what might happen next, at the inauguration of our President-Elect, with regard to the Covid-19 vaccination campaign, in the midst of so much stress in our lives and in our country. Preach the Gospel Frank - please tell me where God is in all of this? Well, as usually is the case, the first word that must be spoken to hear the Gospel is a word that calls for truth-telling, for real repentance, a word we probably don't want to hear,

that wakes us up to the import of the Gospel grace. That's what happens to the prophet/priest Eli, aged now in today's lesson in 1 Samuel. It was a troubled time for the Hebrew people. They worried about the darkness all around them. The great priest/prophet Eli's family were corrupt. They had betrayed their charge to the people. So God comes 3 times to Eli's young servant Samuel. The first 2 times, neither Eli nor Samuel get it. It is only after the third time God speaks to Samuel that everyone wakes up to what's going on. God is trying to break through evil, through presumption, and break into the lives of God's people. The Word of the Lord was difficult for Eli to hear, but he trusted God, trusted that the divine way is the better way, no matter what.

It said the Word of the Lord was rare in those days – rare, but not completely absent. For there is always a narrow way of love, of sacrifice, of humility and repentance that God is hoping will break in upon us, like a wave on the beach, dousing us with enlightenment and truth. The Word of the Lord was rare in those days, and it was hard to hear, and even harder to accept. I hear Pastor Berner's voice in my head – "Preach the Gospel."

In many ways, the Gospel from John mimics the Old Testament lesson's context. It was a dark time – Roman rule, another empire rolling over

Israel, like the ones before it, rolling over what they believed was their destiny, their birthright. There was so much failure all around, lots of blame to pass. When here comes Jesus of Nazareth – calling Nathaniel and Philip to follow. Really, Nathaniel asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Little did those early disciples know, little do we, that through Jesus, from the last place they expected it to happen, God was already, and still is, at work transforming the whole world, starting with our hearts! Through Jesus, who called those disciples and who calls us, the course of all things was and is about to pivot. For when it is darkest, God’s new hope, new light, is about to break through. We are not alone. We have a guide. One who calls us into every day, and every important relationship and decision we must make.

I know, it seems like we’ve never been here before, but we have. Ask our African-American brothers and sisters what it feels like to have mob violence spill over into their lives, to have to engage active measures to take away voice and vote, to live in a world where skin color determined so much, with, in their case, a color other than theirs, and exactly like mine, reigning supreme.

Lost in all the rancor and division in our country right now is the fact that there is a holiday coming up this Monday – the honoring and celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr., a witness to the promise of

America and a martyr for allowing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be his primary calling. Dr. King heard the call to discipleship and committed to Jesus' more excellent way. For you see, in the end, it's not just about preaching or hearing the Gospel. In the end, it's about trusting God and following Jesus. It's about loving God and being committed to a relationship of love to our neighbor. Love, and not some kind of push-over substitute. Humility, not avoiding the truth. Hope, not fear and lack of resolve.

"The Gospel Frank. I need it." Indeed, we all do. For the Word of the Lord might be rare in our days, but it, that is, He, most definitely is not absent. Follow Jesus & his way of humble service, commitment to non-violence, and power-filled love. Rare, but the most excellent of ways! Amen.