Under the Fig Tree (John 1:43-50)

Good morning. It is always my privilege to join your service and to have this opportunity to meditate on the Word of God with you. I thank Rev. Choi, for this opportunity. As all of you know, he is attending the annual conference now. I was also at the conference on Friday, the opening day, and saw your pastor providing a significant leadership. He is serving as the chair of the Conference Session for this year’s annual conference. I think we all should be celebrating his leadership and feel proud of him.

I remember the time when I was with you for worship and had an opportunity to meditate on the Word of God a few months ago. It was during the height of the Corona virus Pandemic and we were also going through terrible racial tensions around the country then. Three months have passed since then and we are still going through the same issues today. The Pandemic still threatens our lives, and racial tensions and violence are still going on. The Pandemic and racial injustices, when will all this end? – we ask. What is happening around us today is very discouraging and sometimes I feel so powerless even to pray.

For the last four weeks, the Faith Circle had a weekly study group through which we had an opportunity to learn about John Wesley and Methodism. And, we had a wonderful time together to reflect on John Wesley’s Theology and faith. While studying John Wesley, I ran across a story that gave me strength to continue pray and continue to move forward with the journey of the faithful.

The story goes like this. One day, a young preacher came to see John Wesley for counseling. This young preacher had a very serious problem. He said, “I know that Christ died for me in my head but I cannot believe that He died for me in my heart. How can I preach to my people that Christ died for your sins when I cannot believe that in my heart?” Listening to him, Wesley’s answer to his question was this. “You continue to preach that Christ died for your sins until you believe that in your heart.” So, we too will continue to pray for the end of the Pandemic and the racial injustices in our country and around the world, believing that our prayers will make a difference and that God will work through our prayers in his own ways and in his own time.

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Today’s gospel reading is an account which tells us how Jesus is calling people to follow him. In other Gospels, we see names like Peter, Andrew, James, and John as Jesus gathers his disciples.

In John’s gospel, however, we do not see those names. We only see Andrew in the preceding verses but no James and John. And, in our scripture text, we see Philip and Nathaniel as the first group of people following Jesus. Some Bible commentaries point out that Nathaniel in our text is Bartholomew, one of the twelve disciples. The church records show that Bartholomew was the disciple who traveled the farthermost to preach the gospel. He not only traveled through Asia Minor, but also through Ethiopia in Africa.

He even traveled to India and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ there. There are many records of Bartholomew’s preaching and evangelism activities in India. He was an energetic and dynamic preacher, devoting his entire life for Christ’s mission and ministry. And, he died in Armenia during his preaching tour. The church legend tells us that he was arrested in Armenia and tortured in such a horrible way. And, like St. Peter, he was crucified upside down to his death.

Before he accepted Jesus as the Messiah, we can tell that Bartholomew, Nathaniel in our text, was very skeptical, cynical, about Jesus. When he heard about Jesus from Philip, his response was not so enthusiastic and positive. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (2x) – that was his response to Philp’s invitation to go to see Jesus. We are not certain what motivated Nathaniel to go to see Jesus. But, one thing we know about Nathaniel was that he was a righteous and honest person. In verse 47, we see Jesus’ view of Nathaniel. “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” Nathaniel was a model citizen of Israel in every sense.

Nathaniel was a skeptic and did not have much hope in Jesus when he first heard about him. Nazareth was a small town and Nathaniel did not believe that the Messiah, the One who can deliver Israel could come from that small town of Nazareth. However, encountering Jesus in person, his perception - his negative attitude towards Jesus just melted away and Nathaniel confessed that Jesus was the Son of God and the King of Israel.” Nathaniel realized that he was meeting the Messiah whom he and other Israelites have been waiting for.

It is interesting to note what made Nathaniel melt and change his perception on Jesus, turning from a skeptic to a believer. When Jesus met Nathaniel, Jesus’ first words were these. “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Jesus saw Nathaniel even before Philip asked him to go to see Jesus. What Jesus was saying to Nathaniel was that I knew you before you decided to come to see me. Nathaniel did not know that then but Jesus saw him and knew who he was under that fig tree.

You see, in Old Testament tradition, a fig tree signifies a place of rest and comfort (Zechariah 3:10, Micah 4:5). A fig tree, when it is fully grown, can be 20 feet high and its branches can provide wonderful shades so people can escape the scorching sun in Palestine. And, Israelites were often gathering under a fig tree for prayer, seeking God’s mercy and healing.

That day when Jesus saw Nathaniel, we do not exactly know why Nathaniel went to the fig tree. One thing we can assume, based on the Old testament tradition, is that Nathaniel went to the fig tree to pray, asking for God’s help. Perhaps, Nathaniel had issues, problems in life that he could not resolve them on his own. He needed God’s help and prayed for God’s presence and guidance for those issues/burdens he was faced with. So when Jesus mentioned the fig tree, Nathaniel knew right away what Jesus was saying. Meeting Jesus was the fulfillment of his prayers under that fig tree.

You see, we know what it means to be under the fig tree as well. All of us have been under the fig tree one time or another. When life’s burdens hit us and when we cannot bear the weight of those burdens on our own, we too go to our own fig tree and pray to God for his help and mercy. You see, all of us have been there, under the fig tree. And the good news to all of us is that Jesus will see us whenever we go to the fig tree. Even before we see Jesus, Jesus sees us first and embraces us with his grace.

In the Gospel of John the 15th chapter verse 16, we see these words of Jesus. “You did not choose me but I chose you. I appointed you to go and bear fruit.” Jesus embraced us with his love and chose us to be his disciples. John Wesley explains this love of Jesus as the “prevenient grace.” It is God’s grace which goes before us. Even when we were sinners, God went before us, waiting for us, to forgive our sins and make us righteous when we accept Christ as the Savior. Even before we knew Christ, God already decided to forgive our sins and waits for us.

When Jesus chose us to be his people, he did so with a specific purpose. Jesus appointed us as his disciples to bear fruits.” We are to live our lives, reflecting God’s grace and demonstrating his love towards our neighbors. Love manifests the presence of Christ and it is the hallmark of the people following Christ. This love is not only loving those who love us but also loving those who do not deserve our love. Once I heard one of my friend preachers saying the following. “Christ has revealed who our Father is and what we are capable of doing as the Church when we love another as Christ has loved us. Christians today have been so conditioned by the world that we cannot realize our potential as a church. We are so conditioned by the world so that we only love those who love us.”

Some years back in Asia, CNN Asia had a wonderful campaign called “Power of One.” The purpose of the campaign was to point out the importance of one person’s effort to change the world to be a better place to live. And, the campaign showed Mother Theresa and how she was making a difference among the lives of the poor around the world.

There is a story about Mother Theresa - how she demonstrated the love of Christ through her work. A reporter once observed her cleaning a destitute poor filthy person from the slums of Calcutta with her bare hands. The reporter remarked her saying, “I would not do that for a million dollars.” Mother Theresa replies, “Neither would I!” But, she did it. Mother Theresa was able to do what she did because of love of Christ.

Christ has chosen us to bear much fruit – demonstrate his love and change the world a better place to live not only for ourselves but also for others. It is only when we portray the love of Christ that we can impact the world as Christians.

Christ will see us and find us under our own fig trees. Under the fig tree, we will realize our potential as the body of Christ and we will experience God’s mercy which will enable us to continue our journey as God’s people. So as we worship this day, we praise the Lord for his many blessings and we will continue to live our lives the best way we know to be his people. Thanks be to God.