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First Presbyterian Church
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John 1:43-51

"Algorithms"

I have felt a push, I'll call it a Holy Spirit nudge, to spend time this morning thinking and reflecting about Martin Luther King, Jr. It seems important, since we're living in a time when museums are increasingly under pressure to censor remarks about slavery, as are the national parks. The idea behind this white-washing is that the government does not want to disproportionately emphasize negative aspects of U.S. history or historical figures. SO IT JUST Seemed MORE IMPORTANT TO ME THAN IT HAS IN A LONG TIME for us to spend time reflecting on Martin Luther King, Jr. and as we do that let's remember that Dr. King was first and foremost a Christian pastor and theologian. His moral vision flowed directly from the Gospel. Dr. King was the Rev. Dr. King; His beliefs were born from his faith. A faith we share.

So let's spend time reflecting on him and how far we still have to go to realize his dream of the beloved community, a dream Jesus shared. But I don't want to reflect only on his 1963 Dream speech. I want to go further today and challenge us with His 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam: A time to break Silence". It seems fitting for today. Some lines in that speech appear to be prophetic. This one particularly stands out:
"When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." Let's break that down a little. "When computers are considered more important than people." We live in that day. A time when A small number of powerful interests shape what we see and the news is being bought and curated by a small group, feeding us what suits them and their profit margins.

According to the Pew Research Center, about half of U.S. adults get at least some of their news from social media: spaces where misinformation and disinformation flourish. And the more we like and share that content, the more of it we are shown. Social media learns what holds our attention and quietly feeds us more of the same.

As a pastor, I have real concerns when I watch how this shapes us. Fear multiplies. Anxiety deepens. And trust erodes. According to Pew and the World Health Organization, sustained exposure to misinformation and disinformation fuels fear, anxiety, and a growing distrust of institutions and of one another. And slowly, subtly, it begins to dehumanize us, at precisely the moment when we most need to see one another clearly.

Which brings us to Jesus—and to the filters and algorithms that shape how we see.

The story begins with Jesus going to Galilee, finding Philip, and inviting him to "follow me." Philip accepts the call without hesitation, and then, brimming with excitement, runs off to find his friend, Nathanael. He finds him sitting under a fig tree. "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth!" Philip tells Nathanael. But his friend under the fig tree isn't impressed; his religious assumptions won't allow him to see anything fresh or surprising in a simple carpenter from the wrong side of the tracks. God's Messiah, he is sure, can't possibly come from a backwater town like Nazareth. Nazareth isn't good enough for the divine.

A little bit of background . . . Nazareth was a ridiculously small village; Only 200 or so people lived there. And it relied heavily on the nearby city for its well-being. Most people thought of Nazareth as a po-dunk town out of which no-nothings and ner-do-wells came. It was the last place one expected to find the future messiah. People would have looked to Jerusalem or another big high-falootin city to find the messiah; but not Nazareth, because people had along ago put Nazarenes into a certain box and Messiah did not fit into it.

I've been reflecting on this passage all week And Nathanael's snide remark: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? And as I've reflected, I can't help but think that we all have our Nazareth.

We like to think that we see the world clearly, that we meet people as they are. But the truth is, most of the time, we don't see directly at all. We see through filters. And increasingly, those filters are reinforced by algorithms: systems designed to show us more of what we already expect, already believe, and already prefer.

Let's be honest: Algorithms are efficient. They save us time. They narrow the field. I've spent time curating my Instagram algorithm, and it feeds me exactly what I want it to me feed me: knitting and sewing content, and lots of cat and dog videos, preferably labradors and golden retrievers, or even better cats and dogs together. MY IG algorithm has learned my habits and quietly feeds me more of the same. Which is ok when it's cat and dog videos, but dangerous when it comes to the news. Because before we know it, the world begins to look smaller, flatter, and more predictable. We become convinced that what we're seeing is simply "the way things are," when in fact it's the way things have been curated for us.

And our minds work in much the same way. Long before we meet someone face-to-face, we've often already encountered them through layers of assumption: news stories, social media, past experiences, and cultural narratives. These mental filters help us make sense of a complicated world. But they also limit what we are able to see. And when those filters harden, curiosity gives way to certainty, and openness gives way to judgment.

Friends, This is especially true when it comes to people.

Ou algorithms shape how we see human beings. When that happens, we stop encountering people as individuals and start reacting to categories, labels, and reputations. When I say the name Renee Good, your reaction to that name is dependent on your algorithm. You'll either sympathize with her as a woman and mother, or you'll label her as a domestic terrorist. My algorithm

shared with me that she is a Presbyterian. My Facebook algorithm is filled with a Whole. Lo. OF. PRESBYTERIANS. (and I have verified MY ALGORITHM, since our algorithms often lie) That's right, Ms. Good was one of us.

Depending on your algorithm, you encountered completely different stories about who she was and what she represented.

In John's Gospel, Nathanael is running on an algorithm. It's not a digital one, of course—but it works the same way. It's been trained over time by his religious assumptions, his cultural experience, and the stories he's been told about how God works and where God shows up.

So, when Philip announces, "We've found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about—Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth," Nathanael doesn't pause. He doesn't ask a question. He doesn't express curiosity. He responds instantly: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

The filter snaps into place. Nazareth has already been decided because his algorithm trained him to believe in something.

You see, Nathaniel's algorithm told him over and over again that nothing good can come from Nazareth. Nazareth was just a tiny, insignificant village—barely a dot on the map. It had no reputation for learning or holiness or influence. People expected the Messiah to come from somewhere important. Jerusalem, perhaps. A center of power. A place that matched their expectations.

But Nazareth didn't fit the algorithm.

And so Nathanael doesn't really see Jesus at all. He sees only what his filter allows him to see. Which means he expected Jesus to match those expectations of being a no one, just another two-bit prophet pretending to be the Messiah, which were a dime a dozen in those days.

But before we judge Nathanael too harshly, we should all admit that we do the same thing. We all have filters. We all have mental algorithms that decide, often without our awareness, who is worth listening to, who is trustworthy,

and who can safely be dismissed. If I share with some people that I read something in the New York Times, or the Wall Street journal, whatever I'm sharing can be quickly dismissed depending on one's bias. Nathanael quickly dismissed Jesus because he came from Nazareth. And friends, we all have our Nazareth: people or places we believe from which nothing good can come: your Nazareth could be an opposing political party, or another nation, a religion not your own, or a neighborhood you avoid.

Depending on our algorithm, Nazareth today may look like a threat rather than a neighbor. And depending on your algorithm, your Nazareth is either being reinforced, or your head (like mine) is pounding from the news and your heart is hurting.

But What's remarkable in this story is how little effort Philip makes to argue with Nathanael. He doesn't try to correct him. He doesn't debate him. He doesn't try to reprogram his assumptions.

He simply says, "Come and see."

And that may be the most radical thing in the entire passage. Because "come and see" is an invitation to interrupt the algorithm. It's an invitation to step outside the filter and encounter reality directly. It's an invitation to move before you are certain, to experience before you are convinced.

Nathanael doesn't change his mind because Nazareth has suddenly become impressive. Nothing changes about Jesus' zip code or Background. Nathanel changes because he is willing—just barely—to show up. To come. To see for himself.

And when he does, his vision changes. Not because the facts changed, but because *he* did.

Friends, "Come and see" is how we break the algorithm.

Martin Luther King Jr. understood this pattern deeply. When he called this nation toward racial justice, he was not naïve about how entrenched people's

assumptions were. He knew that America's racial filters had been trained over centuries—by law, by culture, by fear, and by habit.

And he knew something else, too: waiting for everyone to see clearly before acting would mean waiting forever.

So King did not ask the nation to admire justice from a distance. He asked people to step into it. To walk across bridges. To sit at lunch counters. To go to schools and neighborhoods that broke the algorithm they had been taught to trust.

In other words, he invited the country to *come and see*.

His critics told him he was moving too fast. That hearts needed to change first. That unity required patience. But King understood what Jesus understood: vision follows movement. Seeing follows coming. Transformation begins not when we feel ready, but when we are willing to step forward.

Every generation is tempted to protect its filters. To cling to the familiar stories that tell us who belongs, who threatens us, and where God can—and cannot—be found. But faith does not grow inside echo chambers. And justice does not emerge from comfort.

This week, we honor the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who dared to see as Jesus sees. A man who dared to call forth the best in all people — both black and white, both victim and oppressor. A man who looked deeply into the racial hatred of his day, and yet envisioned a world where justice would roll down like mighty waters.

The invitation to "come and see" is an invitation to leave our comfortable vantage points, and dare to believe that just maybe, we have been limited and wrong in our original certainties about each other, about God, and about the world. To "come and see" is to approach all of life with a grace-filled curiosity, to believe that we are holy mysteries to each other, worthy of further exploration. To come and see is to enter into the joy of being deeply seen and deeply known, and to have the very best that lies hidden within us called out and called forth.

Amen.