

It is that time of year where the news coupled with basically every corner of social media will find just the right quote from Martin Luther King Jr., to make things look good. We've all probably been there ourselves, I know I have, because my Facebook likes to pop memories up and remind me that yes, I too have fallen into the obligatory must post something trap of just finding the right screen grab, posting it, and calling it a day. And I think in a lot of ways, we do this in a bit of an effort to water down the actual message of Dr. King. We like to forget the vocal denunciations he made about the war in Vietnam, about capitalism, about the silence of the white majority. We diminish him down to quick quotes and remembrances about his dream, because that's easier to digest, it's more palatable than confronting the fact that if Dr. King were alive today, he would have *a lot*, and I do mean *a lot* to say about the world that we continue to live in, long after his era of the Civil Rights movement was over.

And it isn't just Dr. King that we do this to. It is a commonplace occurrence for every person that would be labeled a prophet, whether in our modern era or biblically. Look at someone like Mother Teresa, we'll look at her service to others, but we won't talk with honesty about how she struggled with belief in God through most of her life. Look at someone like Gandhi, we'll point to his hunger strikes and peaceful forms of protest, but

we won't confront the fact that he was ultimately fighting back against an imperialistic mindset that we still cling to in a lot of ways today. Every single person that we point to in our modern parlance for inspiration or direction, we tend to sugar coat, cultivate, and color according to what we need them to say, without them ruffling too many feathers. At the end of the day, we want our modern day prophets to be what we expect, because to admit that they *aren't* what we expect, is to admit that God works and moves through people that we wouldn't always pick ourselves, thus forcing us to confront the fact that even when it comes to the messengers of God's word, we have massive expectations that are usually blurred by our own prejudices. Now, before we start to feel too bad about ourselves about this, we need look no further than our gospel to realize that this has been going on since at least Jesus' time, but truly forever.

This is one of my favorite gospel passages if I'm being honest, because there is just so much *snark* coming from every direction, but before we get there, let's set the stage. Prior to this, Andrew and John have met Jesus and in turn Andrew has told his brother Peter that they have found the Messiah, so the inner circle of disciples has already started to form, right there in Bethsaida. There is a small faction of people who once followed John the Baptist who have shifted their steps to follow Jesus and now Jesus

is off and running to call more disciples. First he finds Philip, whom we know very little about, and he just tells him, “Follow me.” Now, Philip is well acquainted with Andrew and Peter, being hometown buddies, and so he puts his faith in Jesus and honestly in his friends’ judgment pretty fast. More remarkably, before he’s even really seen or experienced anything about Jesus, Philip runs to his friend Nathanael as a little one man evangelism committee. Without thinking about it, he finds Nathanael and says, they have found the Messiah, the promised one, the one Moses wrote about. He tells Nathanael that it is Joseph’s son, Jesus from Nazareth, and this is where the snark train really starts rolling.

Nathanael, who we really don’t hear from ever again in the gospels, here’s this message and cannot help himself, but blurts out, “Can anything *good* come out of Nazareth?” It’s almost an instinctual response. It would be like me finding out the Messiah was from Ohio—I wouldn’t be able to stop the words from flying out of my mouth. But here’s the thing, we can’t really blame Nathanael. In our minds, since it was Jesus’ hometown, Nazareth has a bit of cache, it carries weight, but during Jesus’ lifetime this was not the case. Nazareth was far enough away from the Sea of Galilee that it wasn’t a coastal community, it wasn’t made up of fishers and tradesmen, but artisans and farmers. It was a bit of a backwater, not close to

anything, not really having much to boast about, and so naturally, being from a coastal city with some oomph to it, when Nathanael hears that the Messiah has come from there, he's skeptical. Are you telling me that the Messiah is from that podunk, little, hick farm town? Come on, man, you have to be kidding.

Philip, being a good friend, simply just encourages him to come check things out for himself. Come and see. And this is where the snark gets even better. Nathanael is approaching Jesus, and Jesus declares, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Basically saying, here's a dude that isn't going to lie, and of course this causes Nathanael to be like umm how do you know me? And Jesus just throws it out there, oh I saw you under the fig tree earlier. Code for, oh I heard what you said about me and my hometown. It's a test. Will Nathanael protest and say no, no, no, wrong guy, wrong context, or will he own it? He doesn't really do either, but it's enough to make him realize that Jesus is who Philip claimed, a rabbi, the Son of God, the King of Israel. In that one moment, he comes to realize that the Messiah is not at all what he was expecting, because ya know, Nazareth, but he's willing to have his mind changed because of what he has experienced.

A huge step in Nathanael's discipleship was that not only did he have to put aside his expectations and have his mind blown about Nazareth of all

places, but he also had to be *willing* to experience what Jesus had to offer, in its fullness. He didn't get to say, well, I'll follow along and just ignore the fact that you're from that hick town. If he did that, he would miss a fundamental part of who Jesus is, a man from a small town that could connect with people about farming and working the land, who knew what economic strife felt like, who was going to speak for the people from the margins, because he had grown up on the margins. Without all of that, Jesus to Nathanael would just be a couple of social media worthy quotes, which wouldn't be Jesus at all.

And thus we arrive at the point where Nathanael's story calls us to account. We might not have a problem with Jesus' hometown, but there are certainly parts of him that when we're completely honest with ourselves, we would rather water down, sugar coat, or ignore completely. More often than not, we give Jesus the MLK treatment and dwindle his ministry, mission, and teaching into digestible sound bites that sound good on social media and shove the rest of the stuff that makes us comfortable to the wayside. If Jesus came up to us and said here is a child of God without deceit would we own up to all the things about him and our calling as a disciple that we choose to ignore or flat out disagree with? Or would we try to back pedal?

If Jesus came up to us would we tell him that we take issue with his whole call to love our neighbor? Would we argue back with him about the parable of the Good Samaritan because if we take it as it is it means we have to love those whom we have been engrained to hate, and not only love them, but take care of them? Would we tell him that we love him, but really need him to tone down his words about economics and our relationship to our wealth because well frankly he's from a small town and just doesn't get capitalism at its finest? Would we tell him we were with him up until the point where he said that we needed to love our enemies? Would we tell him that we're right behind him except for when he told that one guy to sell all of his possessions? Would we say we will follow as long as he doesn't expect us to follow him all the way to the cross, because dude that was a little extreme? Would we say we will come and see as long as he doesn't want us to see things we don't want to see, confront injustices that we would rather remained because we benefit from them, care for people that its just so much easier to ignore? Would we say we'll see the greater things he has to offer as long as he stays in the box we have constructed for him because we can't handle anything breaking our expectations of who the Messiah should be?

It's a hard thing to own, that we have expectations of Jesus, of who we want him to be, and the things we want him to say. It's even harder to

own that there are things that we just flat out ignore all for the sake of our own comfort and keeping our lives simpler. One of my favorite song lyrics of all time comes from Simon and Garfunkel. In “The Sound of Silence” they proclaim that “the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls.” It’s profound because it’s true, and that is a hard thing for us to accept, that the words of the prophets come from our most often ignored corners. And as Nathanael and all his snark teaches us, Jesus also comes from our most ignored corners.

The words of Jesus are written yes on subway walls and in tenement halls. They are written in tattoos and on bumper stickers and on protest signs and on the cardboard signs of people without homes. They are written in the faces of our black and brown siblings, in the clasped hands of our LGBTQIA+ siblings, in pleading of the children in Israel and in Palestine, in the corners of Ukraine and Russia, along the Mexican border and on the streets of the neighborhoods we all avoid. Jesus beckons us all to come and see, but it is up to us if we truly want to see and hear what he has come to proclaim. Jesus beckons us to follow him, but it is up to us if we want to follow in the footsteps of a Messiah who is uninterested in our expectations and crushes any box we try to put him in. Will you follow the Messiah from the backwater? Will you come and see and dare to be changed? **AMEN!!!**