

Epiphany 2, Year B
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St. Paul's, Newburyport, MA

Do you have any full circle stories from your life? One of my full circle stories is that the parish I served as seminary intern in the 1990's was planted by a neighboring parish where my great, great, great grandfather, had served as rector in the 1790's. One of Marco's full circle story is that when we were living in Wiesbaden Germany, he discovered that the town where his great grandfather had been raised was only half an hour from us. Through a number of "coincidences" Marco ended up reconnecting with a second cousin there who shared family history he had not been aware of.

Perhaps you have your own full circle story. Decisions, choices and changes move us away from a home, a community, a country, a profession or a relationship. But then sometimes we end up coming full circle somehow. Or our children, or children's children, or children's children's children do. It's like DNA can find its way home and wants to make an opening to the past. And in those moments we see that a larger design is at work, even though we cannot grasp it in its entirety.

Traces of the Trade: A Story from the deep North – the documentary which we showed here on Thursday evening, and which has been shown on PBS during this past year – displays this full circle dynamic in the lives of the descendants of the DeWolf family of Rhode Island. Ten DeWolf descendants went on a journey together which opened a door to the past and changed them radically. They discovered and had to come to terms with the truth about their family's involvement in the slave trade in the American Colonies. Together they moved past the family's "no talk rule", through guilt and into a sense of deep grief as they encountered the reality of what that trade meant to African slaves and their descendants. Then they found a way forward together that has born fruit in their own personal lives, but also in the life of our Episcopal Church. Their efforts helped lead to the passage of a resolution at General Convention in 2006 to designate a day of repentance and commitment in the Episcopal Church for our complicity with slavery in this country. That day was observed this past October 4th by our Presiding Bishop in a service at the National

Cathedral in Washington D.C., and in many other places around our country.

As the DeWolf family's story shows us there can be real power in these full circle moments of life: Power to see clearly what has been and to imagine what can be; power to repent, amend and to heal.

In our Gospel lesson today Jesus is pointing to just that sort of full circle power when he tells Nathanael that he saw him under the fig tree. Though Nathanael has been skeptical of Jesus, wondering if anything good could come out of Jesus' home town of Nazareth, when Jesus mentions the fig tree, Nathanael confesses him as "*Son of God and King of Israel*". While Nathanael might have been amazed at Jesus' ability to see him with some higher vision under the fig tree, as a devout Jew he knew the image of the fig tree held deeper meaning.

Nathanael would have recognized that Jesus was making reference to a prophetic vision from the Prophet Micah. Micah uses the image of the fig tree in a prophecy about the end times when all faithful people would stream to Jerusalem, where the prophet tells us, "*They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks*", and where ways of war will no longer need to be learned. Micah concludes that prophetic vision of the end times with these words:

"...they shall sit every one under their vine and under their fig tree, and none shall make them afraid." (Micah 4:4)

So Jesus' vision of Nathanael under the fig tree is not just a reference to where Nathanael was sitting before Philip invited him to come and see Jesus for himself. It is also a vision of what is to come - a prophetic vision of Nathanael under the fig tree at the end of time. Jesus was letting Nathanael know that he had seen his past and that he also had a vision of his future. This reference to the fig tree was Jesus' way of promising to Nathanael that if he would leave the shelter of his fig tree, Jesus would lead him in a great circle of discipleship which would end in him sitting under the fig tree once again. But then it would be the prophesied fig tree of the future, under God's full reign, where he, and all creation, would know balance, harmony, and freedom from the fear of all enemies. In that moment Nathanael felt the larger design and he understood who he was

speaking with. And he could do nothing else but confess Jesus a Son of God, King of Israel.

Today that promise of Jesus to Nathanael calls to us off the page of this Gospel as well. It calls to us as individuals and as a people. It calls to us like God called to Samuel in the temple. It calls to us and we have to be ready to answer "Speak for your servant is listening". It calls us see the larger design at work in this moment.

This very afternoon, on the steps of the Lincoln memorial in our nation's capitol, perhaps the best known (and least understood) bishop of our church in recent times - The Right Rev. Gene Robinson, Bishop of NH - will stand, where, Martin Luther King, Jr. once stood, and will offer words of prayer to begin the week of events surrounding the inauguration of Barack Obama as our president. Talk about interlocking full circles and a grander design at work! This full circle Gospel, and this moment which is rife with full circles, ought to assure us that God has looked at our past, and is also looking toward our ultimate future, and wants us to embrace both so that we can be instruments in the coming of God's most gracious reign.

This is a hopeful moment. This is an awesome moment. This moment ought to make us shake in our boots at the same time it makes us cheer with unbridled enthusiasm. God's abundant goodness is on display all around us in larger than life ways. And that is a good thing, because we are going to need that inspiration and that goodness for the demanding, arduous, life giving work that lies ahead of us. May we embrace it confident in the full circle power of God in Christ. Amen+