

"And So It Begins..."
Matthew 4:12-25
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York Center Church of the Brethren
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Once Jesus was baptized and passed his entrance exams in the wilderness, things started happening very quickly. As soon as the temptations by the devil had ended- with the devil failing each one- the angels came and took care of Jesus. The next thing the writer of Matthew's Gospel tells us is quite ominous- John the Baptist has been arrested. We shouldn't be surprised by this. John has been preaching radical sermons to great crowds of people. He has been publicly criticizing some of the religious leaders. He has been an outspoken critic of the oppressive Roman Empire. He has been making powerful people very angry. It was just a matter of time before they acted against him.

It is interesting to note that in Matthew's Gospel Jesus' public ministry begins when John the Baptist is arrested.

Since the beginning of the story John has been the forerunner of Jesus.

He has been preparing the way, getting people ready. And when Jesus was ready, he went to John for baptism. Matthew considered John to be a pivotal figure in God's plan- on the one hand he harkened back to the prophets of the Old Testament. On the other, he called people to look ahead to the new age to be revealed in Jesus. John is the last of the old prophets and the first of the gospel preachers. When he is arrested and removed from the scene, it is a theological cue that the time of Jesus has come. It is the end of one age and the beginning of the next.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. The Greek verb used here is typically used by Matthew to describe movement from one place to another in the face of threatening circumstances. This same verb was used in the story of the wise men returning home by another way instead of returning to King Herod. It is the verb that was used to tell the story of Joseph taking Mary and Jesus and fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. This verb is a cue that John's arrest is a dangerous situation for Jesus. It will be the first of many such incidents.

Where does Jesus go? He heads home to Galilee but instead of going to his hometown of Nazareth he settles in Capernaum. One thing we learned as we traced the movements of those in the Christmas story- is that geography matters. Matthew uses geographic movements as symbolic of theological truths. So what's the big deal about Capernaum?

It is a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, near the mouth of the Jordan River. It is near the regions occupied by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. Remember how much Matthew likes the word, "fulfilled?" Matthew sends Jesus to that region to fulfill another Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah, chapter 9. *"In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations."*

And then Matthew quotes a text that we repeat every year during the Christmas season. *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness- on them has light shined."* This is the same prophecy from Isaiah that says this, *"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us. And he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of peace."*

Are you hearing the connections? For Matthew's congregation of Jewish Christians- they needed the Old Testament, the familiar Hebrew scriptures- to help make sense of their new reality. This Jesus is the one promised by God centuries before. Matthew is making it very clear that every move Jesus makes is in accordance with God's plan. It is not random happenstance.

Once Matthew has Jesus settled in Capernaum he begins to preach. His first sermon is very familiar. *"Repent, for the reign of heaven has come near."* Where have we heard that before? Jesus is preaching the exact same words as John.

But with a twist. When John said, " *The reign of heaven has come near.*" He was pointing to a time in the near future, warning the people to get ready for what was **about** to happen. When Jesus preached those same words he was saying, *"It is happening now- right here, right in front of you. The reign of heaven has come near- so near you can reach out and touch it."*

Matthew will spend the rest of his Gospel unpacking what that one sentence means- what does it mean that the reign of heaven has come near? Jesus will spend a lot of time teaching his disciples and the crowds what it means and what it doesn't. For now, Matthew wants us to know that the reign of heaven, the empire of God, will change everything. It is a cause for repentance. The arrival of God's reign demands a reversal of direction, a moral turn around for all people.

You could get whiplash in these few verses- because very quickly we find Jesus calling his first disciples. Except for a brief mention in chapter nine of Jesus calling Matthew, the tax collector, this is the only time in this gospel that we see Jesus calling his disciples.

Matthew wants us to know three things- he wants us to know the family relationships- two sets of brothers. He wants us to understand their occupations- all four are fishermen. And he wants us to know just how quickly the men dropped what they were doing to follow Jesus. Last Sunday in our Sermon Text study Sunday School class we spent a good bit of time talking about the motivations of these four men. People wanted to know why they followed Jesus so quickly. There were many assumptions- maybe they didn't really like being fishermen; maybe James and John wanted to get away from their Dad. I kept reminding them that their motivations don't matter. But some in the class wanted the motivations to matter.

I reminded them that what the Gospel writers **exclude** is just as important as what they **include**. For Matthew's purposes, the most important thing is that the four men dropped their nets and followed. Period. That may be hard for our 21st century minds to comprehend. We want to know why.

We want to know what the implications were for their families. We want to know how they made a living following Jesus. We want to know if Jesus was so compelling that they had to say yes. Or maybe they had already heard about him or heard him preach and were so impressed that they had to go with him. For Matthew it doesn't matter. He doesn't care about their psychological profiles. All we need to know is that these men- two sets of brothers, were fishermen who heard Jesus say, "Follow me." And they did.

Matthew wants us to know, in the words of Tom Long, that " *Jesus disrupts family structures and disturbs patterns of working and living. He does so, not to destroy but to renew. Peter and Andrew do not cease being brothers; they are now brothers who do the will of God. James and John do not cease being sons; they are now not only the children of Zebedee but also the children of God. All four of these disciples leave their fishing nets, but they do not stop fishing. Their past has not been obliterated; it has been transformed by Jesus' call to follow.*" (1)

We will find other call stories in the other New Testament writings- taken together they form a fuller picture of those who were called and why. But for Matthew- what is most important is that Jesus called and they said "Yes."

As soon as he has called his first four disciples, Jesus begins his ministry. In just three verses we see, in microcosm, the major themes of his ministry in the rest of Matthew's Gospel. Verse 23 tells us what we need to know- it is a ministry of word and deed. Teaching, preaching, and healing.

His ministry is about the mind, body, and spirit. Jesus is concerned about the totality of human life. And it all points to God and what the reign of God, the empire of God, looks like.

Matthew goes into great detail about the healings. *"Curing every disease and every sickness among the people. They brought him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics. And he cured them."* This list signifies the great scope of Jesus' power- no illness or malady was beyond his healing ability. His power overwhelms all that opposes God and seeks to oppress humankind- even illness.

Then Matthew gives us another geography lesson. First of all, *"By placing Capernaum in 'the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali,' Matthew taps into a rich reservoir of meaning. The area has a long history of experience with empire and oppression, but also a deep narrative of hope for transformation by the grace of God. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the ancient Hebrew tribes that had colonized northern Palestine. These territories fell to the Assyrian empire in 722 B.C.E., and by the time of Jesus had come in turn under Roman domination."* (2) Due to their location in the northern tip of Palestine, whenever anyone invaded, they were the first and the last to bear the brunt of it. They knew what it meant to be oppressed by human empires. They lived in occupied territory for much of their existence.

Matthew tells us that Jesus' *" fame spread throughout all of Syria (which was northwest of Galilee). And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis (a Greco Roman area southeast, on the other side of the Sea of Galilee), Jerusalem (90 miles to the south) , Judea, and from beyond the Jordan."* So basically, Jesus was reaching people throughout the known world. He was healing and preaching and teaching crowds of Jews and Gentiles. Those living in the shadow of empire hear a word of light and hope through the ministry of Jesus.

Most religious people expected that the Messiah would be revealed in Jerusalem- the center of religious, political, cultural, and economic activity for the empire. Instead, he begins his ministry in the backwater towns of Galilee. That is no surprise for those who knelt at his cradle in Bethlehem. God's revelation of Jesus- beginning with his birth- takes place in unexpected places among ordinary people.

Matthew's purpose in this text is to show that the proclamations and actions of Jesus reflect his conviction that God desires to establish a reign of justice in the world, in a way that contradicts the logic of the empire. The good news of God's empire is for those most marginalized by human empires. And if it does not then it has nothing to do with the reign of God announced by Jesus starting in Galilee. One of the responsibilities of the church today is to be vigilant about our tendency to lose the gospel's anti-imperial edge. If our

message offends no one in power; if it offers no sustaining hope for the weakest and most vulnerable in the world, then it is not the good news of Jesus.

It is precisely in the center of the Roman Empire, to people being crushed in the grip of oppression and corruption, that Jesus proclaims, "The reign of God is near." In his words and actions, Jesus embodies the transformative power of the good news- which is bad news for the powers that be.

Jesus' message and presence have never been good news for those who are deeply invested in the preservation of the current order, or who benefit from the imbalances of human social, political, and economic arrangements. For those who suffer under these systems, however, the message of the Gospel generates hope, vision, and renewed life, which in turn fuels their participation in and realization of God's presence and power." (3)

When we feel as though we cannot prevail against the powers in our world that oppose God's transforming wholeness and love- remember Jesus' call to those four fishermen. His call to Simon, Andrew, James, and John displays the disruptive, world-shaking character of discipleship.

When we respond to God's call, we can no longer be satisfied with the way things are.

When we respond to God's call, we must be willing to take on the empire in ways large and small.

When we respond to God's call, we must be willing to move on- to move forward- in whatever way we are led.

We too live in the grip of the empire- we too are faced with temptations to worship the false gods all around us, to seek easy answers to hard questions. We may find ourselves giving in to the temptation to believe that we cannot do anything to change the world- to bring about God's justice and peace. We are living in a time of great despair and fear for many. But we are also living in the time of the One who said, "The reign of God is near."

My prayer for each one of us is that we would live as though we believe the words of Jesus are true.

The reign of God is so near, we can touch it. May it be so. Amen.

End Notes:

- *MATTHEW, BY Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox, 1997. pg. 43.*

- *"Theological Perspective," FEASTING ON THE WORD, Nancy Elizabeth Bedford. Year A, Volume 1. 2010. 60.*
- *PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, Stanley P. Westminster John Knox. 2010. P. 28.*