

## Sermon – January 22, 2023

It's not very often that one scripture in our lectionary reflects back almost exactly what was in another scripture in our lectionary, but we happen to have that today. If we look at our lesson, our prophecy from Isaiah, it's one that we often hear during Advent, because it's one of hope. It's the realization that God has promised to break into God's world, to bring hope, to bring light, to open us up. Isaiah says, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined." Now, he's speaking to a specific people, "brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali."

Here's the interesting thing. Now we turn to Matthew, after Jesus hears that John has been arrested he doesn't go after John. He doesn't rile the people to create a riot. He withdraws. He goes away to contemplate what he needs to do to continue the work that John began, that pointing away from the world and pointing towards God. "He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali." Nazareth happens to be in Zebulun and Capernaum happens to be in Naphtali. So, Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy that Isaiah told God's people.

Isaiah speaks to a people that are being exiled, being taken out of their land and into another land to live. Things look bleak for them. Isaiah gives them the promise, the light shines in the darkness and darkness is not going to overcome it. Jesus, as the incarnation of God, God dwelling in flesh and blood, becomes that light in a very real way to God's people even if they're not aware of it yet. He picks up and takes into a new depth the message that God's people have already been given by John. Jesus says, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." Notice he doesn't say is coming near. It's not something that we're waiting to happen, but it's here and near right now. It's not something we have to wait for. It's not, 'It's going to come near when you pass into the new life,' it's here now. God's Kingdom, God's presence, is here with us; not only is it with us it comes *through* us as we follow Christ's way.

Jesus begins this ministry of repentance. If you remember *to repent* means literally to turn away. So, we turn away from one life, one understanding of who God is, and we turn toward God and new possibilities. That's the danger in developing a relationship with God, it can change us. It transforms us. It calls us to live life differently than how we have in the past. That became very real for four brothers, well two sets of two brothers, who left everything they knew and started a brand-new life. "As he [meaning Jesus] walked by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, his brother casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately, they left their nets and followed him." That was an immediate repentance, turning away from that life that they've only known - getting fish, selling fish, a fishermen's life - and turned and went with Jesus. "As he went from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him." James and John were willing to even give up the family life they knew because they felt this call by Jesus.

As we read through the gospel we see that Jesus will call them to do things. He's going to tell them how they are going to fish for people, and the way in which God calls us to reach out in God's name. It was not a prerequisite for them to become disciples. One of the ways that my dad has always phrased this, which I love and I use this phrase myself and you'll probably hear me use it again is, "God doesn't call the equipped, God equips the called". If God is asking us to be used in God's name, God will give us what we need to do that task, as scary as it may seem. But we get to make the choice. Some of us choose just like the disciples, those four brothers, immediately say, 'OK God. I'm gonna give up everything I know and I'm gonna go where you want me to go. I'm gonna do what you want me to do.' It's a very simple decision. For others it takes more time, more discernment, more understanding. Eventually we get there. There may be some that get called or hear the call and say no. That doesn't

mean that God turns God's back on them, God still is in relationship maybe nudging, maybe supporting, maybe helping them in what they are doing.

God calls, and God's call didn't stop when Jesus got his 12<sup>th</sup> disciple. Jesus asks all who walked with him, who followed him, to do what God asked to do; to help bring the Kingdom of God into our world. That's a difficult call: to be willing to do what Jesus asks, to be willing to live the Kingdom of God here means choosing what God wants over what the world tells us. It means seeking to love in a way that's different from what the world tells us, because the love of God isn't just the warm fuzzy feeling we have for someone else. The love of God means being willing to do something, to act out on God's behalf, to care for even those who would seek to hurt us.

There's a meme going around on Facebook which has been very challenging to those of us who claim to be Christian because it says, "The challenge of the Christian isn't loving Jesus, it's loving Judas." It's loving the one who chose to betray, who made the mistake. The one who appears, and I use that word intentionally, *appears* to be the enemy. To still love them is to love the way that God loves. To see each individual, no matter their action, as a beloved child of God. That's the challenge of discipleship. That's the challenge of being called by God. God's call isn't the same for everyone. God called 12 men to be his apostles, to go and do those things, but those weren't the only 12 that were sent. If we read through scripture we see that he sent 70 in pairs out into the world. He sent those whom he healed to go tell the message. Each individual was called to do what God wanted them to do. It wasn't always the same thing.

Our challenge is to be open; to listen for what God may be calling each one of us, as individuals, and then us as a congregation, to do; then take the next step of faith, the hard step of faith, to let go of what we know and have always known with the hope that God will take us to where God wants us to be. Because the hope in letting go is the knowledge that the darkness isn't going to overcome us, is the knowledge that the light of God, seen through Christ, will carry us to where we need to be. We are never, ever left alone, in life and in the kingdom, because God is always with us showing us how to be faithful, showing us how to live the kingdom. Jesus did it by, "...teaching in their synagogue and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." We don't necessarily know the details of how all of that happened, we just know that it did happen. Jesus was our example of how to be faithful to a call. He knew what God was calling him to and he willing did it. Those four men, those two sets of brothers, heard the call, were willing to drop the life they knew for the hope of the life that God promised.

How can we, in our lives, open ourselves up? To what is God calling us? Then how can we find the ways that God is showing us and equipping us to answer and fulfill that call?

Let us pray. Holy Lord and God, as we hear of the Kingdom of God can be a scary thing to behold, to realize your power, your might, the fulness of who you are. And yet, through our faith in Christ, we know that we have our place, that we are upheld, supported and loved. Give us the courage, Lord God, to look to you. To be willing to turn away from what we know and love, to find the hope and promise that you will be with us. Help us find the joy that comes with answering your call, for we look to you as our light and our way, now and always, as we pray these things in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is the end of the transcribed materials.