

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Risking Something Big for Something Good
Matthew 4.12-23
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Our gospel story is one of the key stories that shapes our thinking and our imagination. Jesus says, “Repent for the kingdom of God is near.” And he says, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” Repent; the kingdom is near. Follow me. You’ll fish for people.

For obvious reasons, this is a very important passage. Repentance is the act of turning away from what you were doing before and turning to a new way. The kingdom of heaven is what Jesus often calls the way of God or the reign of God that he announces and embodies. So, he’s saying, turn away to a new life; the time has come; God is changing the world. And then he says follow me. That right there is the defining way we imagine discipleship. People still say that all the time: follow Jesus. When they said that in the 1st century, that meant it literally. That’s what you did with a rabbi, you followed him around. To follow Jesus is to be his disciple, following him into this new world. And finally, fish for people. Jesus takes us where we are, what we’re doing, and transforms us as we follow him as disciples in the kingdom work of announcing and living in the new world God is bringing about as we turn from our old ways to God’s new way.

For all these reasons this may be a very familiar passage—I hope it is. It’s a story that makes us who we are. I’ve just become convinced it’s a story that we haven’t yet understood fully. And for that reason, it’s a story that makes us who we are even more than we may realize. This morning, I’d like us to make a close reading of the passage to see three things that may get overlooked. These are not three small things, but rather three things to see that are three ways of seeing the one big thing: the gospel.

First thing to see. The thing that triggered all of this, here at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. Verse 12: When Jesus heard John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee to Capernaum and then began to preach. There we see what triggered the beginning of Jesus’ ministry: The arrest of John the Baptist began Jesus’ ministry. We’d spent all of chapter 3 with John in the wilderness at baptism, but now, curiously, the gospel doesn’t say why John was arrested until chapter 11. Here it just reads, “when Jesus heard John was arrested.” Later, Matthew will tell how John was arrested by Herod Antipas and was thrown in prison and then beheaded as part of a debauched, tragic episode.

Though none of that has taken place yet, John’s arrest seems to signal to Jesus that the time has come. So, from the very beginning, Jesus’s ministry is against the backdrop of the violence and oppression of the Roman empire. And of course, it will be that way at the end too, at the cross. John could be arrested merely for speaking out against the behavior of Herod, and later murdered at the whim of Herod. In the face of the power of Rome manifested in people like Herod, the people of Israel had little power, a lot of fear, and a lot of reason to believe that their lives were always vulnerable to whatever Rome wished to do when Rome wished to do it. This is what it means to be vulnerable.

John was brave. He wasn't afraid to call out the hypocrisy of the local religious leadership at baptism. He wasn't afraid to tell people to repent and change their ways, and he wasn't afraid to tell even king Herod to repent. Or maybe he was afraid. Maybe he was terrified. Maybe his voice quivered and his hands shook, but he did it anyway. Courage is not the absence of fear but is doing what must be done in spite of your fear. John was courageous. No one is greater than he born to women, Jesus would say. Jesus was courageous in the same way. And as we see here in Matthew 4, in just the same way. The message Jesus began to preach is word-for-word what John preached. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.* John may have been silenced, but Jesus picks up the torch and carries on. The word of God cannot be made silent. That's the first thing to see: The time has come, and the Word of God will not be silenced by the Herods and the Roman empires of the world.

Second thing to see in this passage that helps us see the gospel. See where Jesus does all this. Verse 13: *Leaving Nazareth, Jesus went and lived in Capernaum by the sea.*

Geography is more important than chronology for Matthew. We're not told how old Jesus is at this point (probably about 30); we're not told how long it had been since the wilderness temptations or his baptism. But we are told lots of details about "where." Where things happen is important to Matthew. Already in the gospel, we've seen references to Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth, Galilee, and now Capernaum. In each case, we're told that Jesus went there to fulfill an ancient scripture. In this case, Isaiah 7. Jesus went to Capernaum in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali (ancient Israel tribal lands) so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled, "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan—Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them, a light has dawned."

Capernaum will be the place from which the advent of the kingdom will be proclaimed and embodied, a remarkable development, but one that Israel anticipated, as we see from Isaiah. What makes it remarkable back in Isaiah's time was that Capernaum was under direct threat and eventual occupation by the Assyrian empire. What makes it remarkable in Jesus's time is that Capernaum is under occupation by the Roman empire. Capernaum is not only under Roman control like everything else in the world they knew of, but Capernaum, a town of about 10,000 on the shore of the sea of Galilee, is the seat of the power of Herod Antipas, the very one who arrested and killed John the Baptist. It is again, as in Isaiah's words, a place of people dwelling in darkness and in the shadow of death. But to them in Jesus, though they hardly know it yet, a new light has come.

When we're told Jesus went to Capernaum after John was arrested, the geographic, geopolitical detail we're seeing is Jesus going right into the heart of darkness, going right to the foundations of empire, right into the teeth of the dragon, and there, lifting high the torch of gospel light. This is Jonah going right to the heart of Nineveh. When he proclaims, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is near," he does it within earshot of the Roman king who has already thrown John in prison for saying the exact same thing; a king whose kingdom has already demonstrated clearly its response to the message of the gospel.

The kingdom Jesus proclaims is a direct challenge to these human systems of violence and oppression. Predictably, proclamation of this kingdom can come at a high cost, one that John and Jesus both bear. It is a cost that many disciples of Jesus have borne over the centuries, speaking truth to power, embodying the way of Jesus in the face of mocking, rejection, and loss of family, job, status, or even life.

Jesus's ministry begins, just as it will end, and will always be lived out in the shadow of the violence and injustice of characteristic of human power. In the face of that, Jesus proclaims a new kingdom has come. This is courageous, dangerous messiahship, and therefore, calls for courageous, sometimes dangerous discipleship. Disciples of Jesus must always be cautious about getting too cozy with human kingdoms, principalities, powers, riches—all the hallmarks of the kingdoms of this world. Christ's way looks like foolishness and weakness except to those who are being saved who have eyes to see the way of Christ is God's wisdom and God's strength.

That leads us to the third thing to see here in this passage: the cost of discipleship. Famously, the first ones to follow Jesus were fishermen who left their boats to follow Jesus. They became disciples to him as their rabbi. Most of us stand pretty amazed at this act of following and wonder questions like: what inspired them to just leave and follow after him like that? what did they see in him? Did they know him already and this was the moment they were waiting for? I don't know that we have answers to all those questions. I want to come at the story today from a different angle anyway.

They are fishermen on the Sea of Galilee based out of Capernaum, which we now see as a stronghold of Roman power. Fishermen are not out fishing just because they like fishing; it's their job, their life and livelihood. But they are not out fishing either just to feed their families and sell some at the daily market to their neighbors. Any fisherman on the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum most likely has a contract to fish with a daily quota due to the Roman tax collector waiting on the dock for them to return with Rome's share from their catch. Rome has soldiers and kings to feed, after all. No matter how they feel about Rome, no matter how they may wish things were different, no matter what they whisper about their deep satisfaction in the quiet places where no one can overhear them, no matter how their fathers and their father's fathers may have been fishermen on this lake, now they work for the very empire which they detest. We can wonder what that felt like, how they bristled under it, had no alternative to it, and what happened to them if they didn't come back with their quota, but what difference will it make? nothing will change . . .until it does.

Years ago, I spent a summer in eastern Europe just a year or two after the fall of the iron curtain, I was told this: A revolution begins the day you decide you'd rather die than go on living one more day the way you're living, and it doesn't start until that day comes. I wonder if for the fishermen Simon, Andrew, James, and John, that day had come. When Jesus said follow me, they knew they'd rather follow him to whatever end than go on living one more day the way they were living. When they hear Jesus say: the kingdom of heaven has come. They heard a call to revolution, and they answered. No matter that they didn't know yet what kind of messiah he would be or what kind of revolution he would lead or what it would cost them, the important

thing now is they knew it meant leaving behind what was before and risking everything for it and for him. And so, they drop their nets.

And if you're a parent like me, perhaps you're already thinking about Zebedee, with whom they left their nets. They leave their father there. Zebedee, the father left behind on the boat. We usually feel sorry for Zebedee. I mean, our admiration for the young men dropping their nets to follow Jesus, to join him in this revolution of a new kingdom of heaven that's come near, is tempered a bit by what it means for their poor father left on the boat, left holding the nets all by himself. We wonder what he's supposed to do now. And what if he has to now face alone that Roman fish tax collector the next day on the shore? How is one man supposed to catch all the fish he and his sons were supposed to catch?

We should feel sorry for him, right? Poor old Zebedee, watching his sons leave him to do all the fisherman work. But, just consider one idea that could change the way we understand this story and Zebedee and perhaps the gospel. What if he told them to go?

What if they heard Jesus say to them, "Come with me," and they turned to their father? And what if their father said to them something like: "Today's the day. You must go. Go and change the world, go and do what he says, go where he leads, follow him every step of the way. We cannot keep living the way we're living. Be the revolution. Live for a new kingdom. You be the light in this darkness. You go. I will face what must be faced. I will pay the cost. I will bear the burden for you and for all whose lives you will change."

Imagine this with me, this isn't just about a financial, practical problem for Zebedee. He understands the consequences he will face by failing to bring to shore tomorrow's catch; violence may come down on him now. When he comes back with empty nets the next day, maybe they tear up his contract, maybe they confiscate his boat, maybe they take his life. It is the kind of sacrifice parents make for their children, but even more, it is the sacrifice this parent made for Christ.

If any of that is true, and perhaps we can assume it is, then Zebedee is not one just to feel sorry for as the hapless, overworked father abandoned on the boat by his impulsive, if earnest religious children. Zebedee is a saint, a true disciple of Jesus, joining John the Baptist, maybe, as those who give their lives for the gospel that Jesus embodies, in hope of the kingdom that has come near. In hope that in Jesus for all those dwelling in the shadow of death, God's light will dawn.

Three things about this story are worth paying attention to: Jesus's ministry was triggered by the arrest of John the Baptist. Jesus's announcement of the kingdom of heaven was in Capernaum, in the face of the king and kingdom of this world. Jesus' first disciples were living under the thumb of that empire, and their leaving to follow Jesus was an act of revolution, protest, and sacrifice.

Maybe seeing these things helps us see the story and see our discipleship more fully:

The ministry of Jesus bringing light to the world continues even now in and through you. The Word of God is not silenced; the light of God is not extinguished but burns brightly in you.

The way of Jesus calls for courage in disciples. Disciples of Jesus must never confuse the empire for God's kingdom and must have clear eyes to see and follow the way of Christ.

There is always a cost to discipleship. There will come a time when disciples of Jesus must risk something big for something good. And what we see now in this story made clearer is that there was never a moment when this was not true.

For all of those who have heard the call of the gospel and followed, for all of those who have made it possible, for all who have paid a high price, for John, for the fishermen, for their father, their unnamed mother, and all who have been inspired by them from those first days until this day, and for you, who carry on their legacy and their ministry in Christ, who walks before us and walks with us, thanks be to God. Amen.

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