

Week of January 10, 2021

Matthew 4:12-22

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he went to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum, which lies alongside the sea in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴ This fulfilled what Isaiah the prophet said:

¹⁵ Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
alongside the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles,
¹⁶ the people who lived in the dark have seen a great light,
and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death.

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to announce, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!"

¹⁸ As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," he said, "and I'll show you how to fish for people." ²⁰ Right away, they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and ²² immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

A New Beginning

After Jesus' time in the wilderness he encountered a new kind of problem. While he successfully resisted temptation, he now found himself facing a reality where he had to deal with the consequences of his refusal to give in. John the Baptist was arrested by Herod Antipas, creating a dangerous situation for Jesus. Sources of the day say John was arrested because he criticized Herod, specifically by calling out what he saw as immoral practices, including economic policies that resulted in the death of many poor people. Jesus hadn't even started his public ministry, and already it was in trouble because the one who announced his coming had been arrested by the Empire for preaching a message that Jesus would only intensify. Our translation makes Jesus' leaving Galilee and settling in Capernaum sound hum-drum, but it's not at all. The verb translated as "went" in verse 12 is actually a word more like "fled" - it's only going somewhere if you go because of a threatening circumstance. John's arrest was that threatening circumstance, already setting up a challenge between Jesus' authority and Rome's as Jesus prepared to begin his public ministry.

Jesus settling in Galilee, we're told, was to fulfill prophecy. Matthew quoted Isaiah 9, which began, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light." It is clear that Matthew is calling Jesus the light to shine on Rome's darkness. But the prophecy of light shining in darkness was not the only reason for the move. If you've been counting, this is now the fourth place Jesus has lived - he was born in Bethlehem, fled to Egypt, returned to Nazareth, and finally moved to Galilee following John's arrest. It's a fitting origin for an itinerant preacher. But it isn't just a clue that Jesus would always be in motion, Galilee was a gentile center, so it also points us to the fact that Jesus was a savior for all people, Jews and gentiles alike. That great light Isaiah told of was being shined for all people.

In Galilee Jesus could have decided to lay low, waiting for the uproar surrounding John's arrest to calm down, but he did not. Instead, he got to work, despite all the dangers he faced in that work. He began his ministry by preaching the same message that John did, calling on people to repent because God's kingdom was at hand, and by calling followers. The first two called were Simon (Peter) and his brother Andrew, who were fishermen. It's notable that these followers were not powerful people but ordinary laborers. Without any hesitation, they left their jobs, their family, and anything else they might have had, and began to follow Jesus. Jesus then called another set of brothers, James and John, also fishermen, who left their jobs and family to follow

Jesus. These first four followers were risking a great deal by accepting Jesus' invitation. Leaving a job meant they couldn't guarantee the ability to feed themselves or provide for any of their other most basic needs. James and John leaving their father very likely meant they were also giving up any chance of inheritance. They gave up everything to follow Jesus. The job they were to do, as Jesus put it, was to "fish for people." This new job meant they were to disrupt other people's lives just as Jesus disrupted theirs, and call them to help create God's community. Risk abounded in this call.

We don't have to give up much to follow Jesus. Christianity is still the dominant force in our country. But that dominance hasn't amounted to much. Violence, hatred, division, hunger, poverty, and more continue to plague our communities. These are not signs of God's kingdom. In the face of danger, Jesus chose to continue on. He called followers who gave up everything to face that danger with Jesus. We are being called to the same. To be a true follower of Christ is to give up our own lives of privilege and comfort in order to face the dangers of this world with courage and integrity, seeking to transform our society not by hatred and violence, but by love and justice. What are we willing to give up in order to follow Jesus? And if we do give up our lives, will we call others to join us?

Loving God, you call, but we have been hesitant to answer. We cling to our lives, thinking we are too good to deserve to experience the insecurity that can come from following Jesus. But your truth tells us that the only real security in this world comes from you through Christ. Help us to trust in your love, to know that it is all we need, and from it we can rebuild our lives and community into what you envisioned for us. Amen.