

“Till the Kingdom Comes”  
Sermon on Matthew 4:12-23  
by Berry French @ BMPC January 22, 2017

Introduction to the text

Our Scripture for today records the beginning of Jesus public ministry in the Gospel of Matthew. Mary Katherine and our high school seniors and I will be preaching primarily from the gospel of Matthew in the coming months, as the lectionary follows the life and teachings of Jesus from Matthew’s perspective. Today's story of the first disciples being called follows directly on the heels of Jesus' baptism and his temptation in the wilderness. Our text begins with the report that John the Baptist has been arrested by the authorities. It's a foreshadow to how the local religious and civic authorities will interact with Jesus throughout his ministry which was cut short by fear that led to state-endorsed violence.

Let us hear God’s word to us today from Matthew chapter 4, verses 12-23.

Text: Matthew 4:12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”*

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he 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. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

## Sermon

Folks, I have to tell you from the start that this feels like a **heavy** Sunday to be standing before you preaching the Good News. We never take the task of preaching lightly, but on the Sunday following Donald Trump's inauguration as the President of the United States, and yesterday's women's march in Washington DC with sister marches right here in Black Mountain and Asheville, London, and Cape Town, and Bangkok, the task of preaching feels particularly daunting. For **I am committed to be pastor to all the members of our beloved church**; our beloved church that works to ensure our community is a sanctuary for all God's children.

I know of several church members who made the trip to Washington DC this weekend to participate peacefully in the women's march - Thanks be to God. And Thanks be to God, we have several members who proudly voted for Donald Trump and are grateful for his presidency. I am convinced **that diversity makes us a stronger and more faithful** church community.

Our nation is divided. Our Christian family is divided. And in the face of that reality, our church family is called to be a place where ALL feel safe and welcome and **wanted here**, a place where we love one another, and **disagree with** one another, **listen** to one another, **respect** one another, and **pray** for one another.

Many of our own families are divided. Not all of our families, but most of us had difficult family gatherings around Thanksgiving or Christmas with extended family who voted differently than we did and we seem to be having a harder time understanding and respecting one another.

Indeed, this is a **hard season for our country**. And this is a hard season for the Church, as **we strive** to be the beloved community that bridges the gap, **unifies us** as the Christian family, and provides spaces and relationships that can **sustain difficult conversations** where we **LISTEN to one** another and **love one another** and **pray** for one another.

Thanks be to God, we do not have to figure this out alone. As Christians, we listen for God's voice as we turn to Scripture and to generations of the faithful who have themselves lived through divisive times. Each of the Gospels tell their own version of the Jesus story ... Matthew starts with the geology, making sure we understand Christ's connection to the prophets and the ancient Israelites. Matthew makes sure that we don't miss Jesus connection to and continuation of the ministry of John the Baptist, and John the Baptist's connection to and continuation of the ministry of the Old Testament prophets.

For in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' **first public words** are *exactly* the same as John the Baptist first words: "REPENT, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2 and 4:17).

You see, God's prophets and God's people have been at it a long, long time. God's people have been through tough times: slavery in Egypt, the Babylonian exile, Roman persecution, the early church's arguments over the role of circumcision or food laws. God's people **have been divided before**. And God has always raised up prophets to proclaim repentance and the good news of God's love.

Right in line with John the Baptist and the prophets of old before him, Jesus first words are REPENT. And Jesus second public words are FOLLOW ME. Our Lord begins his public ministry with "Repent and "Follow me."

**Repent, the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!** It's the first public message on Jesus' lips in Matthew. To repent: to turn from our sinful ways. To turn away from a life not oriented towards God and turn our lives in a direction that is oriented towards God and makes sure that our actions and our words and our very lives are pleasing to God and in line with what God asks of us. I'm certain we can all find humility in the need for our own repentance.

Kingdom of heaven language is commonly misunderstood by many Christians to be referencing the afterlife. But when Scripture, and especially when Jesus talks about Kingdom of heaven he is not talking about heaven, as in where we go when we die. When Jesus talks about Kingdom of heaven, he's talking about **God's reign on earth** – God's **in-breaking** into our humanity. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. With Jesus, God's presence is already breaking into our world.

Jesus did not come proclaiming the afterlife. What Jesus **came to proclaim is God's justice, and God's mercy, and God's love breaking into history** and into humanity right now! And Jesus invites us to be part of that in-breaking. Jesus calls us to work towards that Kingdom coming on earth, just as it is in heaven.

So our role as the Church of Jesus Christ is the serious and risky task of proclaiming the good news by **caring for our neighbors, standing up to injustice, standing up to racism and sexism and classism**. For that has always been the task of the church of Jesus Christ – it's what Jesus came to do – call us to repent and proclaim GOOD NEWS to all people, especially to the most vulnerable.

Jesus proclaimed the good news of God's love and grace to the Samaritan woman at the well; to the woman caught in the act of adultery; to the leper; to Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector; and to the guilty criminal on the cross next to him.

So as we worship on this Lord's Day, we will do what we always we do. We gather and we confess together. We pray together. We sing together. We read Scripture together. And on our best days, we remember that **our redemption and our hope lies not in our own hands**, or in our best community organizing, or in our elected leaders, or in our national pride, or in our flavor of religion ...

our HOPE and our Redemption **has and always will be** only in God's sovereign grace. Our HOPE and our Salvation lies in the **simple invitation by the brown-skinned, homeless, Jewish Palestinian** who bid Andrew and Peter, James and John to "Follow me."

Now thankfully, Matthew gives a clear picture of what following Jesus means, what actions we are asked to take to follow Jesus. For as soon as the first 4 disciples have said YES and dropped their nets, Matthew names three specific actions of Jesus.

- Jesus teaches.
- He proclaimed the good news.
- He healed. That's what following Jesus means.

Jesus touched the people and brought them wholeness. He healed them and taught them and proclaimed GOOD NEWS to them. The Good news that no one is excluded from God's love. The Good news that God's abundant love is big enough to embrace all of us. The Good news that ultimately our lives, our society, the whole creation is not ours, but rather belongs first and foremost to God.

Thanks be to God following Jesus means following him in teaching and bringing good news and healing folks in a huge variety of individual callings. None of us are asked to do it all, but each of us is asked to do our part - to say YES to following Jesus.

Some of us follow Jesus as he goes about teaching in their synagogues and in their churches, by teaching in our elementary schools or coaching on our baseball fields, or mentoring our confirmation students, or teaching in the high school classrooms, in our Sunday school classes, and in our WeekDay school.

Some of us follow Jesus as he goes about proclaiming the good news with our care for the women at the Swannanoa Correctional Center; or with our care of the individuals and families picking up fresh produce and personal dignity through Bounty and Soul; or the good news of help with a heat bill through SVCM's ministry.

Some of us follow Jesus as he goes about curing every disease and every sickness among the peoples, by our work in health care as nurses or doctors or health care professionals. Several of us heard the calling to work in counseling or nutrition. God calls some to research so the miracles of modern medicine can be utilized to bring about healing.

I am convinced that **God is calling you**. Jesus doesn't issue a general follow me - he issues a **very specific and personal** invitation: Andrew - follow me. Chloe - follow me. Beverly - follow me. Jerome - follow me.

So friends, here we are, gathered together as a community of faith, as a sometimes fearful and sometimes hopeful group of believers, with a variety of political leanings, a variety of spiritual gifts, and a variety of abilities and ages.

Here we are gathering again on a Sunday morning to do what we do - to pray, to sing, to read Scripture and remember our sacred stories ... stories that **remind us that we've been here before** and that God will again love us through this.

At the outset of Jesus' ministry, Matthew quotes from Isaiah to assure us that Jesus has come as the prophets prophesied. Isaiah tells us: *The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.*

Last weekend 30 of us were on our high school youth beach retreat and we worshipped again at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston. The two hour worship service was powerful for all of us, but in particular the music spoke to my soul. The powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in those old spirituals and those faithful souls was too much even for this white Presbyterian to stay still.

At one point, I was basically dancing in my seat 'cause I just could NOT sit still, and then eventually enough congregation members were standing that I felt OK standing and clapping and swaying and singing my soul out.

Later, as I processed that sacred moment I experienced in that sanctuary, and thought about the murders that happened in that basement, and the death sentencing of the murderer the prior week, and the Mother Emmanuel community's season of sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, and the way that week after week, all these 75 weeks since the June 2015 shooting, Mother Emmanuel has gathered to SING together, to pray together, and to read Scripture together, and to remember and **claim Isaiah's words that the People have seen a great light**, and that even from the shadow of death - light has dawned, God's kingdom has come near, and that is something to celebrate.

And I realized, that we, like Christians all over the globe, will gather again today and do what we do. We will pray. We will read our sacred Scripture. We will sing songs. **We will be united around the family Table.** We will talk about Jesus and his love for us and his call on our lives. We will gather to place our trust in God, and **recommit ourselves** together to **work for justice and equity** for all people. And then we will go out into the world and follow Jesus till the Kingdom comes ... till the **bonds of injustice are loosed** and every person is treated with the respect and dignity and love that Jesus showed to everyone he interacted with.

And because **we are a people of prayer, we will pray for our President** and his Cabinet. We pray for our national Congress. Pray for our Governor and our state legislator. Pray for our country and pray for our church. We will pray for our family and pray for God's family – God's big family.

We pray for those in our family who gathered in DC for the women's march and pray for those who gathered around the world at sister marches. We pray for the police who work to keep us safe.

We pray for all those who are **scared** because of the **increase in discrimination and violence** in our beloved country due to the **color of their skin**, or the **accent in their voice**, or their **chosen religious practices**, or their **ethnicity**, or their **sexual orientation**, or what **county they were born in**. We will PRAY because we are a people of prayer, and because God cares.

We pray because when Jesus told us to pray for our enemy, I'm pretty sure that was meant to be **an all-inclusive list** - as in pray for the world, not just those who agree with us or look like us or vote like us or speak our language.

We will pray that the **personal actions we take** will be pleasing to God, and our action will treat everyone as God's beloved children and therefore be in line with following Jesus. And we will go out into the world knowing that we are CALLED to follow Christ as he sets out before us teaching and proclaiming the good news to all people, and **bringing healing** to those who have been **harmed by violence** or by **greed**, by abusive childhoods or by poverty or hunger, by discrimination or by mental illness, by alcoholism or by damaging religious leaders or groups.

Because that's what we do and that's what God's church will do till the Kingdom comes! We will proclaim the good news in word and in deed; for we are the church of Jesus Christ. And we are only the Church of Jesus Christ **when we all together, all of us**, from our various background and nuanced theological beliefs and various political leanings and various abilities and gifts come together as a family to follow Jesus.

So let us be the Church together. Let us follow Jesus together till the Kingdom comes right here on earth as it is in heaven.

AMEN.