

Isaiah 9:1-4

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. 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. 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. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

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. (365)

Ana-cho-RE-o is a word seen a lot in this gospel narrative, to flee or take flight. The writer of this gospel, Matthew, uses this word a lot, *anachoreo*, which Jesus finds himself doing a lot or people do on behalf of Jesus a lot.

When Jesus was a baby, Joseph took flight with his betrothed Mary and their infant from Judea to Egypt where Herod the Great, out to kill Jesus, couldn’t get him. When Jesus was a bit older and Herod had died, Joseph brought Jesus back to Judea but fled to Nazareth because Herod’s brother, Archelaus, was now ruling over Bethlehem, he whom Joseph had no reason either to trust.

Much later in this narrative, Jesus would flee because some Pharisees had begun to plot in how to destroy him, and later still Judas would flee when he realized what he’d done in selling Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver.

As for now, these middle two times, Jesus takes flight because of John the baptizer, first when word reached Jesus that John had been imprisoned and later when word reached Jesus that John had been executed. Both times, Jesus flees because of political terror wielded against John.

John, as you likely know, was Jesus' cousin and (more to the point) was his herald. The one who was to come before, John would make a way for Jesus in the world, announcing him in a couple of remembered cases, and otherwise simply going before him, out to the wilderness first, down to the river first, gathering disciples first, falling under the powers of this world first.

As a prophet, as a man of righteousness, as someone who didn't fit easily into the world as given to him, John was the son of Temple priest but he himself went out to the wilderness, reviving a less civilized, more ancient way. And implied in his being such a herald for Jesus was Jesus' ill fit in the world as given to him. Really, Jesus' arrival would amount to something altogether too big. He would never fit unless a way might be made—which John would do, ever going before. Born first, but barely; baptizing first, and only (baptism something Jesus never did, only commanded that it should be done); eventually getting arrested first; terribly to be executed first, John was the one to watch. If you wanted to know how this would likely go for Jesus, John was the one to watch.

Which, I think, Jesus did. And which, I think, we should as well, always watching for when John shows up in the narratives of Jesus' life and then noticing how Jesus responds.

This morning, we hear of John's arrest and of Jesus taking flight.

It's easy to miss it because the word is translated here "withdrew." "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee." But I think that betrays the tone of it. To withdraw, it seems to me, is to do something of your choosing, to do it even placidly, whereas to flee is to do something compelled of you, pressed upon you, something even of fear. Just so, "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he fled to Galilee."

He heard this (of John's arrest), it seems, as he returned from the wilderness. There he'd endured those forty days in the wilderness, tested as to his worthiness of being the Christ in the world, tested as to whether he could handle all the power that would come with this. There, he'd come close to the devil, he who might have hoped Jesus wouldn't handle it so well, wouldn't handle power with grace or self-control or compassion, would rather have gone berserk with it, enjoyed really abusing it—which he could have done.

He could have turned stones to bread, and by this effectively enslaved the world—for, as every would-be tyrant knows, he who controls the food supply controls the populace. But he didn't.

He could have thrown himself down from the highest heights whereupon angels would land him safely to the ground, and by this he would have effectively enthralled the whole world—for as every would-be tyrant knows, ordinary people have a hard time resisting a spectacle. A near-death experience, some blood on the face, a fist in the air: who wouldn't leap at such a chance to survive so spectacularly? But he didn't.

Finally, he could have simply given himself over to the devil, the divisive one who's at the root of every politics the world over, power gained by dividing "us" from "them." He could have leveraged the spirit of divisiveness to rule over any and every kingdom and empire and nation the world had ever known and would ever know.

Which would have saved him a lot of time. By this, Jesus could have won power by dominance, by intimidation and terror, rather than by love, the painstaking winning of the world by love, acts of compassion and care that happen one-to-one, encounters between I and Thou by which the world might slowly, over centuries, be won.

Wouldn't you just rather love than make war? Wouldn't you simply prefer life-giving to death-dealing?

Emerging then from this wilderness of nothing but temptation, Jesus returns to a world where evil is more banal, less of the supernatural, more of the ordinary sort. Herod, now Antipas in power, has arrested John, and though the narrative doesn't give reason for this, and though Jesus might himself not have known exactly why, he might have been able to put two and two together just as we can.

John was righteous to a degree that a tyrant would hate: a tyrant, someone who wants to own you, wants to know that he *can* own you and even how, can figure where you're weakest and press on those points to get you to heel.

But John had no such weaknesses. He didn't seem to want access to the comforts of the world. He didn't seem to want power to dominate people with. He didn't seem to want the company of the glittering or the impressive. What he wanted: who knows? What he wanted: that was more elusive than all the things he seems not to have wanted. And how do you buy or own or captivate someone like that, someone so incredibly free? Free of want?

By holding them captive, I guess, literally making them your captive. John was imprisoned because Herod decided to imprison him. John was gathering attention, gathering power and influence, though for what and among whom is a worthy question, though perhaps to Herod these were of little matter. Such things (a righteous man gathering attention and influence) were a mounting threat to someone who (Herod) saw threats everywhere and in everyone.

It's crazy how weak-kneed those in power can be—afraid of so many things that they have to be in the protection of armed guards, or simply themselves heavily armed, to feel safe in a world that, absent such heavily-armed fear, is actually quite safe.

It's crazy how the most dangerous thing is the people who, afraid, arm themselves because they believe so very much in what they fear, which then manifests it.

John has been imprisoned; Herod has done this. Eventually John would be killed; Herod would do this. John's arrest, then, was the beginning of the end for him—and as he was the herald of the Messiah, Jesus the Messiah could now glimpse his own end.

And so, he fled to Galilee and made his home there.

Galilee was a bigger place than Nazareth. So Galilee as a place for withdrawing from Nazareth is a bit like withdrawing from Lenox to Boston: the relative bigness of Boston makes it a strange place to “withdraw” to. But fleeing to Boston from the Berkshires does make sense, especially if what you're fleeing from is your notoriety. You can lose yourself in a city in a way you can't in a small town.

Then there's the fact that Galilee was a Gentile region, and few were the people there who'd have any expectation of the likes of Jesus. Whatever messianic expectation you'd find among Jews in Nazareth you'd find far less of among Gentiles in Galilee.

All of which is to say here he might be safe.

Here he might shirk himself free of this terrible birthright—to be the Christ: no...? no, thank you?

Is it jarring to think Jesus might have been as tempted by ordinary life as he perhaps was by the possibility of great power? Is it jarring to think of Jesus as someone who might have feared his purpose as much as any of us might have were it ours? Is it reorienting to wonder whether Jesus was less afraid of the devil than he was of what his resistance to the devil now made possible, made imperative, that he must now be the Christ, the Christ who embodies and manifests sacrificial love?

Which could likely mean the cross?

Is it blasphemous to consider that here he might live, which the story says he did—made his home there by the sea. And who knows for how long? The brevity of the telling shouldn't have us assume it was just as brief in the living. Like, maybe this *was* one more temptation. Maybe this *was* as one last temptation, the possibility that he might live as a normal man and eventually die as a normal man, never to have to confront political terror, never to have to confront human suffering, this person and that person, come to him one by one and then in crowds, never to have to fear Herod again, this apparently endless line of Herods, always replenished upon being extinguished, political power always finding the very people who least well serve with it, haunted by "Herod" his entire life. Maybe he lived here for a month, for a year.

By the sea. A home by the sea.

I hope it was lovely for him. I hope it was lovely, as lovely as the world's need of him was great.

It was also efficacious, apparently. For after a time (a month? a year?), from that time, Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." These are, please notice, the very same words that defined John's ministry. These mean, please consider, that Jesus would now step into the work John's arrest had left undone, that Jesus had decided he would step into that role, which would, doubtless, place him back in Herod's sights.

Imagine doing work of righteousness that has proven so provocative to the political powers it could get you killed. Imagine stepping into the vacated place, vacated because the person who had been doing it was now disappeared.

The unnerving thing for us this morning in these United States as of right now is that this work of imagining might not demand of us too great a flight. The unnerving thing for us as of now is that this might actually arrive to us to do. This moment of standing in such a place, this imperative to bear true witness to acts of politic terror: this might arrive to us to do. Minneapolis, Minnesota isn't that far away. Lewiston, Maine is closer still. Last week the Right Rev. A. Robert Hirschfeld made news for saying as much. Bishop of the New Hampshire diocese of the Episcopal Church said at a public gathering that we might be entering a new era of martyrdom and that clergy should "get their affairs in order."

This piqued the world's listening, this dramatic statement.

In a longer interview, Hirschfeld made it clear he wasn't being dramatic and he wasn't encouraging acts of self-destruction. He was really saying what he's been saying in his 30 years of Christian ministry and what Christian preachers everywhere say from their pulpits on the regular.

To be a martyr is to be a witness: martyr is simply Greek for witness. And such witnessing isn't always so risky. I've lived my life amidst such times of low risk, when the truth is pretty easy to insist upon.

But there are other sorts of times, times when to bear witness to the truth is risky indeed, even deadly indeed. When politics demand an adherence to lies, it becomes risky to witness to the truth. When those in power demand of those to be governed a submission to lies, then witnessing to the truth can land you in scary crosshairs. This is always true, and yet this is always our calling, we who seek to follow Christ. The cross is never not part of the bargain. The cross is never off the table. It simply depends upon how reliant on lies the world is on any given day.

Today we wake to a world very reliant on lies. Someone else has been killed. Federal agents have shot yet another citizen of Minneapolis. Video evidence shows that the story the Feds are telling about it is a lie. Eye-witnesses have been rounded up and detained, perhaps because they can't be trusted not to tell the truth. One witness has released a sworn affidavit about what she saw, and now she's in hiding, afraid to go home because word has reached her that she might likewise be detained.

We can hope never to be so very pressed upon. We can also work to lessen the likelihood that we might. We can resist lies when they're small and seem silly. We can devote ourselves to equality and justice in how we daily live. We can take our society seriously, reject any discourse that undermines it or abuses it. And we can vote for candidates who seem less interested in wielding power than in serving the Constitution, whether upheld by those at the federal level or those on local boards.

We can also take such times as these, times of retreat, times of withdrawing from the menacing of the world to remember who we are and whose we are. We belong to Christ. We are to follow in his gracious way. We pray that this might be easy and light. We prepare, for it might be amidst terror and untruth.

Flee into this moment, and then emerge to the daring call: "Follow me."

Lord, grant that we would.

Thanks be to God.