

Epiphany 3A  
Sermon 1.22.23

**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)

It's an obvious point, but sometimes those are the ones easiest to overlook. Terry Eagleton makes it in a book of his I'm reading. He's one of my favorites. He writes, “The Jesus of the New Testament never once counsels the sick to reconcile themselves to their sufferings. On the contrary, he appears to regard the source of their suffering as demonic.”

We see this here, in this reading we just heard, if not that sickness is demonic (as with the demoniac in Gerasa and elsewhere) then at least that the sick are not to reconcile themselves to their suffering. No, they're instead healed, and by this they're encouraged to seek healing.

This is what's implied, it seems to me, in the close proximity of these two—the proclamation that the kingdom of heaven had come near and the curing of every disease and sickness among the people. It's as if the very nearness of the kingdom results in the healing, the very closeness of God's reign results in restoring. It's as if essential to the kingdom of heaven is full health, utter wellness.

Well, I imagine we're all comfortable with this. I mean, if the miraculous healing is a hard thing for us to believe, it's likely because it's miraculous, not because it's a healing. It's the miraculous way that such healing apparently came about that probably makes it hard for us to believe. But the move to heal probably seems unsurprising. "Of course Jesus would do such a thing."

Jesus has begun his ministry, spurred at least in part because of the arrest of John.

And we don't know why John was arrested. We don't what crime he's purported to have committed or what charge Herod might have leveled against him—if any. Really, it might just have been a whim, a grudge.

It's hard to know whether this Herod was exceedingly feckless or exceedingly brutal.

We do learn, but later, why John had been put to death. It was on account of Herodias, Herod's wife, whom Herod took unlawfully to be his wife, whom he took from his brother when she'd been his wife and Herod had had him killed. (Think *Hamlet*.) John kept saying it was unlawful for Herod to have her, and it's perhaps on account of all this that John was arrested, and it's clearly stated later it's because of all this that Herodias later requested to have John killed.

What we do know is that this arrest deeply affected Jesus. He withdrew upon hearing it, withdrew from Nazareth to Capernaum by the sea.

This is a little like withdrawing from the Berkshires to Boston. Nazareth was a lot smaller than Capernaum, so withdrawing to Capernaum is a little surprising.

On the other hand, Capernaum was largely Gentile territory, so the withdrawal might have been less about getting away from hustle and bustle and more about getting away from the familiar, from a place that's known and where you're known.

In Jesus' case, to be known is to be under threat.

*Anacho-RE-o*: Matthew uses this word a lot. In this gospel, this word: Matthew uses it a lot. Often translated as "withdraw," it connotes fleeing, taking flight. When Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus flee to Egypt because of Herod: it's *anachoreo*. Later, when they decide not to return to Bethlehem, instead to "go away" from Judea to Nazareth of Galilee because of Archelaus, brother to Herod: that's *anachoreo*. Later still, when John was at last beheaded, and Jesus withdrew into the wilderness where though a crowd followed him and would eventually be fed by him: *anachoreo*.

New Testament scholar Raj Nadella makes explicit what the word makes implicit: "In each instance, people flee because of imperial violence or the possibility of such violence."

So it is here. Jesus hasn't merely withdrawn to this seaside town. What he did was *anachoreo*. He fled to it.

(If quietly.)

And it does indeed seem to have been in response to John's arrest—John who was his cousin, at least according to the Gospel of Luke, but John who was also his herald, the one who'd ever go before Jesus. He was the one to prepare the way for him in the world, and now that way seemed even more a way of danger.

So maybe he shouldn't go that way?

We don't know how long he remained withdrawn in Capernaum.

Remember, time is slow in the Bible.

We don't know how long he lived among Gentiles in Capernaum, who'd have had little context for knowing of him, who'd have had no messianic expectation of him or anyone else.

The story *does* say he made his home there so it might have been a long time. Months. A year. Buying fish in their marketplaces, drawing water from their village well, doing carpentry work here and there as needed. I don't know. What do you think?

Just prior to this withdrawal, Jesus was tempted in the desert by Satan. As if to test his mettle as Christ, as if to see whether he was up to the task. Maybe this was one last temptation. To live among strangers as just a regular guy.

But even here prophecy found him—for it had been foretold that the people of the region to which Jesus had withdrawn would someday have brought to them, or have brought up from among them, light of the sort that could only come from the Jews, from the God known long and well by the Jews.

Matthew also does this a lot. In this gospel narrative, our writer sets the story of Jesus as tied tightly to the Hebrew tradition of the law and the prophets. Nothing is known for certain about our gospel writer, but it is supposed that he was a devout Jew, given that he was well versed in Jewish scripture and practice. It's also supposed that he wrote for Jews, given that he seldom feels the need to explain Jewish scripture and practice.

As such, though, he's awake to the possibility that Jesus is the true continuation of the Jewish way in the world. I mean, by the time of his writing this, the Temple had been destroyed, making this once Temple-based religion ripe for reforming if also renewing. Most Jews would go the way of the rabbis and the synagogues, take to the study of the scriptures and the home-based practices commanded there. Some, however, would go the way of Jesus, taking him to be the new

Temple, his sacrifice to be the final one, and the law now to be written on the people's hearts and its commanded practices now internalized into peoples' hearts, their minds and souls.

Matthew's gospel is one that insists on this being not a deviation from the tradition, or even a grafting on of something new to the old tradition, and certainly not a radical restart of a new tradition, but a continuation, with as much continuity as reform, even utter fulfillment.

When it comes to the sibling rivalry that is these two religions, Judaism and Christianity, which were born as if twins from the same terrible moment in history, the life of Christ and the destruction of the Temple, Matthew leans into it, this conflict that would come tragically to define these twins. He's not shy about which side he's on.

We must be careful here. Antisemitism is always a wolf at the door of Christian practice. We must be careful here.

Jesus made his home here, in the busy village of Gentile Capernaum.

Home.

And then, from that time on, Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

He had decided. While withdrawn, while making a home, something he's never remembered elsewhere to have done, he also had decided, taking up the very mode of ministry that John had been forced to leave off. Repent: this is to say "return," according to the original in Hebrew, "come back to the life-giving way." Repent: this is also to say, according to the original in Greek, *metanoia*, "Change your thinking. Expand your perception, for by doing so you'll recognize the nearness of the kingdom, the immanence (among you, within you) of the reign of God."

*Metanoia*, not paranoia when it comes to the living God and what life God means for us all.

You know, it's possible this message was one aspect of why John was arrested. It's possible that this invitation to a change in mindset and imagination was threatening to Herod and all he stood for. To see above the highest authority on earth, to perceive beyond the terrible truths which worldly power insists are though ultimate: this perception can be deeply disruptive of tyranny, deeply disturbing to tyrants.

It's no coincidence that Soviet regimes, Communist dictatorships, seek to stamp out any religious practice among the people, seek to proscribe among the populace any sense of the transcendent. There can't be anything higher than the state and its steel ceiling. There can't be anything above and beyond the dark roof laid upon the human spirit. No such source of hope, no

such source of strength or wisdom or resilience or beauty: it all must come from the state and its apparatchiks. All benevolence must be believed as coming from them. All power must thereby be theirs. The human frame must be accepted as the source and end of all that's good. Its bureaucracy or marketplace doling out the best we can hope for.

So, let's not hope for higher than that. I mean, who do you think you are?

The fishermen Peter and Andrew, James and John might have known something about this. From one line of thinking I traced, it seems the fishing industry in Palestine at this time was fully under the control of the Roman Empire. Caesar, apparently, owned every body of water, and all fishing was done first and foremost to benefit the imperial elite. It's said fishermen couldn't get licenses to fish without joining a syndicate, and most of what they caught was exported to the cities. This left local communities impoverished and hungry. It deprived them of the dietary staple they had depended on for centuries and, adding insult to injury, the Romans collected taxes, levies, and tolls each time fish were sold. As one scholar I read online claimed, "To catch even one fish outside of this exploitative system was illegal."

It reminds me of when our tour guide in Costa Rica from our trip last winter talked about bananas and the village where he grew. It wasn't until he got to University that he found himself having to pay for a banana. He took one, as one does, and then was asked to pay for it. And he was bewildered. And incensed. "What kind of world is this?" he recalled thinking in his telling us the story. And he was laughing while he said it. But he has a point. What kind of world is that, where a tree produces a fruit and then you pay someone else for it so you can eat it. Or a lake hosts a fish for which you pay someone in far off Jerusalem, or even further off Rome, so you can have food to get through the day.

For all this, Ched Myers explains, that in Hebraic culture "the hooking of fish" was a euphemism for judgment on the rich and the powerful. This means maybe that, when Jesus asked Simon, Andrew, James, and John to "fish for people," he was asking them to come out from under the pervasive social order of power, exploitation, and domination, to participate instead in God's now close kingdom of sustenance, justice, healing, grace.

Which they did immediately. Twice it says "immediately." Which is to say an experience that has no mediation, no medium or media transmitting, interfering. No, an embodied experience that comes of actual encounter, actual presence. The thing we missed during our long years of Covid quarantine and social distance. The thing I missed anyway, this thing that anchors

us to the actual, this thing that anchors us in the truth, and the absence of which makes ripe circumstance for untruth, outright lies.

The more degrees of separation there are between assertion and experience, the more room there is for exploitive power, deceiving power.

Jesus' call is immediate. It comes with little distance between assertion and experience, invitation and effect. The presence of the kingdom is presence, actual presence. And its fruits are healing, restoring, a making whole and complete and perfect, which suggests rather strongly that this is God's aim for all, this is our creator's hope and insistence for all.

We are not to be resigned to our suffering. We are not to be meekly accepting of whatever injustice or injury comes our way. We are not to be set back in to silent compliance that everything happens for a reason, so we just get what we get, and we don't get upset. I mean, that's fine as far as it goes. It's fine for a preschool teacher to say to her students when not everyone can get the yellow crayons, that some will get the green or the blue. I never objected when my kids' teachers said that to them. But as far as theological statements go, or whole-life philosophies, we can do better.

And, to be clear, this has been the basis for whole-life philosophies. The stoics, much of ancient Greece, were all about accepting your lot in life and getting on with it. And, yes, the sense of the tragic, so highly developed in the Graco-Roman world: it makes for great art—theater, poetry, all that. But it also has a quieting effect on the masses, while serving those in power with further blessing.

Hey, slaves, you get what you get and you don't get upset.

Hey, Ukraine, you get what you get and you don't get upset.

Hey, precariat amidst a neoliberal economic order, you get what you and, well, you know the rest.

Christ stands as a “no” to all that. The cross of Christ stands as God's “no” to all that, and as God's insistent “yes” to something less painful, less toilsome, more joyful, more pleasing. Christ, his call, and our discipleship all stand as a “yes” to the exploited, that they be given grace, and a “yes” to the enslaved, that they be made free to live in joy. These stand as a “yes” to the ground down, all upon whom is laid the heavy burden of a world devoid of all transcendence, a world made total underneath a dark roof or steel ceiling; a “yes” that all such rather enjoy the light of God who is transcendent and eternal, the open air of God who is breath and spirit unto all the cosmos.

And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, but what of all whose suffering isn't relieved? What of all the people who pray for healing, and never really get it? All the people who hope for justice, and who even strive for justice, but never in time have it truly arrive?

For such are many. You hardly have to go searching for cases of abiding injustice, persistent unwellness, systemic and ensnaring misfortune, cycles of poverty, environmental unhealth, pervasive degradation and exploitation. You don't have to look hard. These are rife. These are everywhere.

But these are of the world. What is of God is a faithful resistance to such things. What is of Christ is a steady movement in correction of such things.

Did you know the word "resurrection" simply means a setting back up. It's not a word that necessarily means a profound and powerfully grand theological act. It can also simply a setting back up what has fallen down or fallen over.

Up set.

Which, in this simple meaning it seems to me is the theological profundity. Something has fallen over, so God sets it back up. Christ has been knocked over, so God raises him back up, because it's not okay and it isn't something we should just accept as the way it is. God's people, God's creation, have fallen over, so God works resurrection and gets it back to stand.

Up set.

There is something profoundly wrong with this world. And we don't need to accept it. We don't need to find the lesson in all our suffering. We don't need to build character as a fruit of abuse or injustice—or at least not to the exclusion of knowing in our heart of hearts that God intends for us something better, something more of the good.

This is the birthright of all in God's creation. And this is the call to discipleship in our lives, to seek and to enact that birthright in the living of our days, for ourselves, for one another, and for all.

We gather as disciples to this truth, and we are sent as apostles on this mission, that God's kingdom might come close—as it did in Jesus, and does in Christ, it might also in us and through us.

Thanks be to God.