FISHING AND MARCHING FOR PEOPLE

The Rev. Chase Danford Grace Church in New York The Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 22, 2017

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. (Matthew 4:12-23)

Today's reading from the gospel according to Matthew is tightly packed, full of both action and backstory. There are actually four distinct acts to this play.¹

1) Jesus fulfills prophecy, 2) Jesus proclaims a message, 3) Jesus attracts his first followers, and 4) Jesus starts a movement. Each is an interesting in itself, and together they provide a framework for Jesus' entire ministry.

In the first act, Jesus moves to a new home after the arrest of his cousin, John the Baptist. The last time we saw them together, John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River over John's objections. John thought it should be the other way around, that Jesus should baptize him, because Jesus was the one he had been preaching about, the more powerful one who would come after him to baptize with Spirit and fire. But Jesus insists on being baptized, and as he comes up from the water, the heavens opened, the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my son the beloved." Jesus was then led by the Sprit into the wilderness to be tempted, and in the meantime John is arrested for speaking out against Herod Antipas, his ruler. After John's arrest, Jesus leaves Judea to return to his home district of Galilee, but rather than settling back in his own town of Nazareth, he moves 40 miles away to Capernaum

Why is this move significant? Well, the evangelist tells us that it fulfills prophecy. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali, the people who sat in darkness, is at the heart of imperial domination of the Jewish people. It is Galilee of the Gentiles because it was ruled by foreigners. The tribal descendants of Jacob's sons Zebulun and Naphtali were situated in the northern portion of the united kingdom of Israel, but this area became disputed when the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah broke apart and warred continuously against each other. Because of their locations, both tribes were vulnerable to attack by foreign states. As the northern and

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¹ Scholar Warren Carter provided inspiration for this framing of the passage, as well as commentary on biblical Greek. "Commentary on Matthew 4:12-23,"

southern kingdoms battled, both Zebulun and Naphtali became vassal states to a series of Assyrian kings. Both were eventually taken into captivity during the end of the kingdom of Israel. Then the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom, dispersed Israelites around their other lands, and brought in other peoples to live in Israel. Cultural and religious practices blended, angering the prophets. The southern kingdom of Judah eventually became a client state of the Assyrians, too, but avoided the fate of Israel until the Babylonian empire took over from the Assyrians. The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem sacked and exiled Jews throughout the empire. Babylonian rule fell to Persians which gave way to Alexander and the Hellenists, followed by Judean independence for a time, and eventually domination of all Jewish Palestine by Rome. Expectations for the messiah included being a military and political leader who would overthrow the imperial occupation and re-establish Jewish rule over their homeland.

Against this backdrop of empire, the second act of the gospel reading depicts Jesus taking up the mantle of John and proclaiming his message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This becomes the central message of Jesus' own ministry. To understand the fullness of this message, we need to take a look at the original Greek of two words. First, the word translated as repent comes from *metanoia*, which literally means beyond-mind or after-mind. It's understood to mean new mind, as in changing one's mind. In English translation, repentance loses some of its meaning. It doesn't exactly mean to feel remorse for a bad action and changing the behavior. That's part of it, but not all. Metanoia really means a radical shift of mindset and, from that, a radical shift in how one lives life. Metanoia does not just mean to change one's mind about something, but rather to have one's entire mind changed. We hear this echoed in Paul's mystical call to take on the mind of Christ. The second word which bears closer examination is kingdom. This comes from The Greek word basileia, which can also be translated as reign or empire. The same word used to describe the peaceful kingdom of heaven also refers to empires like Rome that rely on fear and forceful domination of oppressed peoples to maintain control. This word choice is almost certainly intentional to highlight the contrast between the way things should be (God's realm) and the way things are (human empire). Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near, Jesus proclaims. Take on a new mind, for God's realm is near.

In the reading's third act, Jesus calls his first disciples and changes their lives dramatically. In act 3, scene 1, Jesus goes for a walk and encounters two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, hard at work fishing. "Follow me," he says, "and I will make you fish for people." Or as the King James more poetically puts it, I will make you fishers of men. This scene highlights Jesus' call to a new life's work. Without comments or questions, these simple fishermen Peter and Andrew abandoned their work and lives and followed him. In act 3 scene 2 Jesus sees another set of brothers, James and John the sons of Zebedee, in a boat with their father. Jesus calls them, too. This scene emphasizes the invitation to the new kind of community Jesus is building. James and John immediately leave both the boat and their father. Jesus' call takes priority over family commitments, a jarring idea even today, but even more so in an intensely family-oriented time and culture in which responsibility to care for one's parents was rooted both in custom and in biblical law. As one commentator writes:²

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Jesus calls his disciples to a new way of life in the reign of God. At its most basic, discipleship means following Jesus, getting behind him and going wherever he leads. For these first disciples it will be a difficult road, and despite their initial obedience to Jesus' call, in the coming days they will often fail both to understand and to obey him. They will sleep through his agony in the garden of Gethsemane, they will flee when he is arrested, and Peter will deny that he even knows Jesus.

Yet, on the other side of their failure, Jesus' message will reach them, entrusted by the angel at the tomb to the two Marys: "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him" (Matthew 28:7). They will run away, but Jesus will not give up on them. He will call them to repent, to turn around and go back to the place where it all began. They will fail, but afterwards they will be called to follow once again. From these first scenes by the Sea of Galilee through the rest of their lives, Jesus calls his disciples to live out the promise and hope that he embodies.

Jesus calls his disciples to a new way of life in the reign of God. The reign of God is another term for the kingdom of heaven, the same word used for the empires of the earth.

Finally, in the fourth movement, Jesus embarks on his itinerant ministry of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing the sick. The disciples will fish for people by following in Jesus' footsteps, casting out diseases and teaching about this kingdom which is not like a human empire, but which can only be reached by taking on a radical new mind-set.

We are the successors to the apostles. We are the church. So how does Jesus reach out to us? What does he mean when he says we will fish for people? What does it mean for the kingdom to be near us? How will we repent? What does all this mean for us today, in this place?

As much as some of us might like to, we can't really explore that question without addressing the obvious. Here in the United States, we have a new president. Whether you voted for him or not, he is, of course, incredibly controversial. So much so that the comments he has made about women sparked a world-wide groundswell of support for the Women's March on Washington, with sister marches drawing in millions more, including 400,000 here in New York. It began in disappointment about the election, but the Women's March transformed beyond a protest against the new president into a positive movement for a broad human rights agenda. Some have criticized the march for lacking a tangible action plan and for embracing too broad a program of support for various issues affecting women, workers, immigrants, LGBT people, people of color, and environmental protection. But in calling together so many people of different backgrounds, the organizers aimed at raising awareness and building a diverse movement. The motto, "women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights" was an effort to help people see that our hopes and our challenges as humans are shared across lines of identity, and to call people into action to support one another. The March was attended by women and men, Democrats and Republicans, religious groups and the secular, and people of all stripes. Because it was non-partisan in nature, the Episcopal Church Women here at Grace organized to attend the New York march together, and Rev. Martha and I joined them, while others from the church also attended the DC march. It was truly inspirational to be in that sea of people yesterday, peacefully demonstrating for a more just and compassionate world. We were doing something, but more important to most of us it seemed was the feeling of being together.

While we were marching, another group of parishioners, led by our rector, were busy creating positive change with their hands and tools at the House that Grace built, our church's partnership

project with Habitat for Humanity. In helping one working-class family achieve housing security in this challenging city, we are also helping revitalize a community blighted by this neglected house and others like it on nearby streets. This great undertaking is an outgrowth of our previous and continuing commitment to offer grants to agencies of mercy around the city that work with the homeless and those with critical housing needs. Next month the Outreach Committee will highlight our work with the hungry by launching a Food Security campaign. Along with educational opportunities, we will raise money at our annual parish meeting for the Souper Bowl of Caring. Come, and support your favorite team with s, to guarantee that they'll win the big game. Next month we'll also have the opportunity to support the Go Project with the parish volunteer day. GO, the Grace Opportunity Project, supports educational equity by offering academic and social enrichment programs on Saturdays during the school year and all day during the summer session. We open the doors of this church for quiet prayer, and we come to the altar for communion with God.

In all we do, we seek to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. In each act of compassionate service to our fellow children of God, we engage in metanoia, breaking our minds free from the forces of human empire as we take on new minds. We act as fishers of people, casting out nets of love to catch those left behind. And, as we bring in the nets, we ourselves are further caught up into the beloved community that is the Body of Christ. As we serve God and God's beloved children, the process of metanoia builds on itself, and our minds and hearts are turned more and more toward and *into* the divine image. As individuals and congregations of repentance seeking new ways of thinking and being, we transcend barriers that divide us, boundaries of political and cultural tribe, nationality, gender, and ideology, and we become agents of Christ's healing and reconciliation.

The sons of Zebedee left their father to serve Jesus. We are not called to leave our families, but we are called to leave behind any identities and affiliations that keep us from loving our neighbor as ourself, from anything that would make us stumble in our journey toward the new mind of Christ. We won't be perfect, of course. Like the disciples, we will stumble and fall, but we will get back up again and continue following Jesus. Those of us who marched for human rights yesterday are called to love all people, even those with whom we disagree about various ways to best advance human freedom and flourishing. Those who support stricter immigration policies are called to love the stranger as much as they love their countrymen and women. They must seek out compassionate ways to serve those who would be hurt by policies they support. All of us are called to love. Love is the mind of Christ. Love is what we were created for, by God who is love and who loves us. Whatever keeps us from love, we must leave behind as we become disciples of Jesus.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.

Let our minds be transformed, for the empire of love is here.