

Year A Proper 3 Matthew 4 12 to 23

As Jesus begins his public ministry, his first words are: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” with “Follow me” soon after that. We know that first words are very important so we’re going to explore these words to discover what they tell us about God and God’s kingdom and where we fit into things.

Repent. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. To get a clearer sense of the exciting news that Jesus is proclaiming, the Greek would be better translated as: Turn your whole life to God for God’s kingdom is now here! Turn your whole life to God. God’s kingdom is here. This wonderful news is quickly added to with Jesus’ words to his first disciples – Peter and Andrew. Jesus says to them, “Follow me” and they do. They drop everything right then and there and become his disciples. And then Jesus does it again. “Follow me,” he says to the next two – James and John – and *they* drop everything right then and there to become his disciples. Every time I lead a bible study on this passage, someone comments on the immediacy of the reaction of those men. Some people are in awe – “I wish I could have the guts to do that” they say. Some equate this with missionaries who leave their comfortable lives to go to a foreign country to proclaim the good news. Some simply say, “We can’t do that. We can’t drop everything.” All of these feelings, these reactions to this gospel story, remove the actions of those disciples from us. That was them way back then. That’s not for us. Well, actually, *it is* for us. We *can* do what those first disciples did. And I’m going to explain how.

Those words that Jesus speaks in quick succession – Repent. God’s kingdom is here. Follow me – are very much closely linked together. Repent. Like I said, this really means to turn your entire life around. It doesn’t simply mean feel badly for some questionable things we’ve said or done and say ‘sorry’. It means reorder our priorities. It means rethink our preoccupations that take up our time and attention and desire. It means step into the life of God’s kingdom and learn to live that new life.

It is the invitation to enter into a lifetime of learning how to live as God would have us live. As Paul puts it, it is a lifetime of learning to have the same mind that is in Christ. Our world does not think, does not operate the way God’s kingdom

does. God's justice is not our justice. Murder gets someone a lot of years in prison and, in some places, the death penalty. Do you remember what God did to the first murderer in the bible – to Cain? God said to him, "When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." And Cain says in response, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face" (Gen.4:12-14). God removes Cain from the 3-way right relationship between God, people, and planet that is God's intended purpose to establish. Jesus loves and forgives the people who pound spikes into his flesh and hang him to die an excruciating death on the cross. We struggle to forgive friends who hurt our feelings. Jesus shows us the lavish generosity of God in providing gallons upon gallons of the best wine at a wedding. We hoard bottled water and toilet paper if we think a disaster is coming. To find out what a society values you just need to follow the money. We pay professional athletes multiple millions of dollars each year but people who work for justice issues are often volunteers. God desires equality while we create social classes. And this is just a smattering of examples of how life in our world is so very different from the life God is inviting us into in his kingdom. It feels impossible, doesn't it, to change the attitudes and way of being so firmly established around us and walk into a life that is loving, compassionate, forgiving; a life of sharing and equality and perfect peace. But it is possible. All things are possible with God. God has already accomplished it. We just need to choose it. This is where the "Follow me" comes in.

Now, perhaps some of you are noticing that Peter and Andrew are two of the disciples we heard about in the call story in John's Gospel just last Sunday. John the Baptist says, "Look, here's the Lamb of God" and Andrew follows after Jesus then goes and tells his brother, Peter, they've found the Messiah and Peter goes with him to check it out. That's not the same call story we get today. Matthew, today, is taking a single moment and amplifying it for us to make a point. Jesus says, "Follow me" and the disciples drop everything and follow him. They were fishermen, the sons of a fisherman. They were working to make a living, working as part of the system of the Roman Empire. Their catch of fish would make them money and supply others with food. They had to work long hours every day in the

continuous cycle of work, make money, sleep, work, make money...It's the exact same system that devours our lives today. The lucky ones are the ones who are in the sleep, work, make money cycle. The even luckier ones are those who had good retirement plans and were able to sleep, work, make money and then sit back while others took over. But this system, then just as now, produces those who figure out a way to benefit from the work of others so that, eventually, they're not the ones doing the work but they're in charge of the work and they're getting most of the money from the work. This system also produces the not-so-lucky ones who, for a variety of reasons, can't do the work and so they're in a different cycle of begging, stealing, going hungry, turning to other things to try to feel happy or to forget about the crappy life they're living while they really long to be one of lucky ones. When Peter and Andrew throw down their nets, they're throwing a wrench into this system. When they ditch dad and the boat, they're ditching the empire and all of the greed, and corruption, and competition, and inequality that goes with it.

Matthew is holding up for us today, a hugely symbolic story of the followers of Jesus who cast off their old life – the ways of the world – and turn with heart, mind, soul, and body toward God, toward the *new* life in God's kingdom. This isn't about quitting your job or leaving home. It's actually much, much bigger than that. It is about leaving our old life and beginning a new one with God. In baptism Paul tells us we die with Christ, and are raised with Christ. We are clothed with Christ, and we become a new creation. *Being* this new creation is actually 24/7 hard work because, as Barbara Brown Taylor tells us, we hold two passports. In baptism we were given the passport for God's kingdom. We *are* citizens of heaven living in God's kingdom, Paul says. But we're still holding onto our old passport – the one for this world and all its brokenness. We live in two worlds. It is constantly our choice as to which one we step into. Every day, multiple times every day, we are faced with decisions: What do we think? What do we say? What do we do? Will we choose according to the path God has asked us to walk with him or will we choose the way of the world ingrained into society?

I've said before that we're so tangled up in the ways of the world – and often think that's the way things are meant to be – that we don't realize we're not choosing

life in God's kingdom. We are going to have those two passports throughout our whole lives, until God's kingdom is fully revealed on earth. And it *is* being revealed. We are learning to choose more and more often to step into the way of life of God's kingdom. I tell people that Holy Trinity is my happy place because there is joy, there is community, there is caring and sharing. We *are* learning to be God's kingdom people here. It's not always perfect and it's not always easy but we *are* learning to have the same mind as was in our Lord Jesus Christ. And that is spreading. We experience the fullness of God's kingdom here during worship and bring this with us when we leave.

This brings us to the second part of Jesus' invitation to us. I've been talking about him saying, "Follow me" but there's more, there's an "and". Follow me *and* I will make you fishers of people. Our invitation to follow Jesus has a purpose. God calls the church into existence for a purpose. When Paul tells us we are made a new creation, he also says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation". God is making his appeal through us, he says (2 Cor.5.18-19). Ministers of reconciliation, fishers of people...the point is the same. We are to live the kingdom life so that others will see how wonderful it is and join us. Our whole lives are to be the invitation to others to "Follow me" that Jesus has already said to us. As more and more people live the life of God's kingdom, it reveals the fullness of the kingdom more and more to the world. It reminds me of an old shampoo commercial whose catch phrase is, "and she told two people, and *they* told two people, and so on and so on and so on" and the tv screen keeps splitting into more and more, smaller and smaller boxes of people washing their hair. Matthew leaves us today with this image of spreading the fullness of God's kingdom as we end with Jesus teaching and preaching and curing sickness throughout all of Galilee. Matthew makes sure he calls it Galilee of the gentiles, quoting Isaiah who called it Galilee of the nations. The term assures us that the kingdom is for the nations of the world, the good news will spread and so, too, will the number of people living the kingdom life.

Turn your whole life to God. God's kingdom *is* here. Follow me...and so on and so on and so on...