

“Back to the Beginning”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³You 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. ⁴For 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. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 4:12-23

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the 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.” ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸As 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. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus 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: “Back to the Beginning”

The seasons of Advent and Christmas have passed. Lent and Easter have not yet come. We are in a sort of in-between time the church calls “ordinary time.” During this period the lectionary takes us back to the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry; the point at which he emerges from the background of history, steps away from his life as the son of a carpenter,¹ and steps forth into his role of preacher, teacher, healer, and savior of the world. We know Jesus so well in *that* role, that it’s hard to think about a time when he was anything else. But his ministry did have a beginning.

¹ Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3, NRSV

And in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), that beginning point is the arrest of John the Baptist.

Now we remember that John was the great prophet who shunned civilization to preach and teach in the wilderness, calling on Jews to repent and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Matthew and Mark both describe him as wearing camels' hair and eating locusts and wild honey and baptizing those who would come to him, in the river Jordan. We remember that Jesus came to him to be baptized and that John, recognizing who Jesus was, thought that it should be Jesus who was baptizing him.

John was bold in his proclamation, at one point calling a group of devout Jews who came to him at the Jordan a "brood of vipers" and calling on them not to rely on their status as descendants of Abraham, but to be trees that bear good fruit or else be cut down and thrown into the fire.² His was a radical voice and he was unafraid to speak truth to power. And that's what got him arrested.

Luke explains that John had been critical of Herod, the Roman ruler in the region, for having divorced his wife and then married Herodias, the ex-wife of his brother, Philip.³ Mark tells the scandalous story of how Herodias' daughter danced for Herod on his birthday and pleased him so much that he promised her anything she wanted. Conferring with her mother as to what she should request, her mother took the opportunity to get back at John for his criticism and told the girl to ask for John's head on a platter. The King reluctantly or not, depending on your source, obliged.⁴

However, it is not John's death, but his arrest that concerns us here. For it is John's arrest by Herod for openly criticizing his marriage and, as Luke puts it, "all the evil things that Herod had done,"⁵ that seems to inspire Jesus to begin his own ministry. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that the arrest of John seems to have been the incident that inspired Jesus to get up and start moving.⁶

Now the church has always taught that Jesus was aware of his purpose; that from an early age he knew who he was and what the trajectory of his life would be. Even so, there was a starting point at which he went from son of a carpenter, to itinerant preacher, healer, and prophet. John's arrest appears to be that moment.

And not only does John's arrest motivate Jesus, John's message becomes Jesus' message. Matthew tells us in 3:2 that John preached "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." In the very next chapter, following John's arrest, Matthew tells us "From that time Jesus began

² Luke 7-9, NRSV

³ Stichele, Caroline Vander. "Herodias." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 2, D-H. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007. 813. Print.

⁴ Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6:17-29, & Luke 9:9, NRSV

⁵ Luke 3:19, NRSV

⁶ Matthew 4:12-17, Mark 1:14-15, & Luke 3:18-23, NRSV

to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” Not only has John’s arrest prompted Jesus to act, Jesus has picked up the message right where John left off.

Now it’s important to stop and understand the terms that Matthew is using here. When John and Jesus say “repent,” they do not mean simply stop what you are doing. The word “repent” means to turn away from something. So, they are actually calling people to change; to not only stop their sins, but to turn away from them.

And when Matthew uses the term “Kingdom of Heaven,” he is not referring to the afterlife, but to God’s Kingdom being established here on earth. As noted scholar N.T. Wright has written, Jesus’ teachings

Are not... about how to go to heaven. They are not about ‘our escape from this world into another one...’ [Jesus’ teachings are about] God’s sovereign rule coming, ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’⁷

What first John and then Jesus were calling people to do was to embrace the rule of God, to repent, to change from what they have been doing, and then live their lives according to God’s will.

Another way to look at that would be to ask the question “What is it that motivates my daily life? Is it my desire for wealth, or privilege? Is it my need to feed and provide for my family? Is it my quest to be successful or to be well-respected in the community?” For John and for Jesus, the goal of life is to always be seeking God’s will and working toward loving and serving God. To turn away from the values of this world and embrace that life lived toward God is what it means to repent and embrace the Kingdom.

John’s arrest would have shown Jesus that following God’s will can be dangerous; that speaking truth to power can cost you your freedom; that standing up for what is right isn’t always widely appreciated. It would have shown him that turning away from the powers and principalities of this world and choosing to follow God can get you in big trouble. But he did it anyway. Which puts the calling of the first Disciples in an entirely different light.

I think we read this story of the first Disciples dropping their nets and following Jesus from the perspective of 21st century Christians. We know how the story ends. We know who Jesus is. But back then, at the beginning, those fishermen didn’t know all the cosmic, eternal significance of who Jesus was. Following him then was a much dicier proposition than it is today.

Those first Disciples weren’t being called by sunny, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Sunday School Jesus. They were being called by someone who knew the risks and who had counted the cost. They were being called by someone who, as it should have been clear to anyone paying attention, was on a course that would lead him to the same fate as John the Baptist.

⁷ Garrett, Greg. "Matthew 4:12-23, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*. Ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010. 285. Print.

They were also leaving behind an identity. They were leaving the comfort and familiarity of home and a vocation they had likely known their whole lives. No more would they be remembered as men who worked on the lake, men who frequented the local watering hole, always smelling of the day's catch, men who worked with their hands. They would now be known as Disciples of a prophet and teacher. Public perception of them would have probably changed, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. And they were accepting the chance that they too, would share John's fate.

Just four weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Christ. We retold the story of shepherds invited by a singing chorus of angels and wise men following a star to the humble home of a newborn child and his parents. It is such a sweet story. The angels were easy to follow. The star, was easy to follow. This Christ-child, is easy to follow.

But today we hear the stories of John being arrested. We hear of Jesus immediately picking up John's mantle and continuing the journey. We hear of working men being called from the only lives they've ever known to follow a path that is uncertain and which is characterized not by comfort and reward, but by work and sacrifice. That's not an invitation that's easy to follow. Angels and stars and babies, yes. Sacrifice and uncertainty That's a little more challenging.

But we have to remember that these men were being asked to come and work for something bigger than themselves: The Kingdom of God. Jesus invited these Disciples to come and fish for people. He used a fishing metaphor because he was speaking to fishermen. It's likely that when he spoke to farmers he talked to them of sowing the seeds or of reaping the harvest of God's Kingdom and when he spoke to carpenters he probably talked about building God's Kingdom. But whatever the language, Jesus was calling them to be a part of the work that God is doing in the world; to be a part of God's Kingdom that is coming and yet, already here.

And that call can still be heard today. God calls to each of us to participate in God's Kingdom. That's why you're here. Oh, I know, you may think you are here because you were on the usher list or because you were invited by a friend or because your parents made you come. You may think you are here because you like the sermons or the music or the fellowship. You may think you are here because it's Sunday morning and this is where you've always gone on Sunday mornings. But I believe you are here because you have been called by God to be here.

And that call urges and beckons you to more than just attendance.

Now, those first Disciples were called to the work of evangelism. Which is a word that scares a lot of you, I know, because it's been twisted to mean a sort of radical, religious fundamentalism. But evangelism simply means reaching out to others and sharing the good news of God's love and mercy in what we do as much as in what we say.

You see, the world is hungry for meaning. The world is filled with people trying to live for something bigger than themselves. The world is searching for God, even if they can't put that

name to their search. And if they can't see God alive in us and hear God's voice in this place and experience God's mercy and compassion in the people who claim to be God's followers... where will they?

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

God's call is to change; to turn away from sins, to turn from our fear, our reluctance, our tendency towards selfishness; to turn from our love of other things that take the place in our lives that rightfully belongs to God, to turn from our willful disobedience and embrace the work that God is doing in the world.

Yes, all of us. Even you.

Jesus changed the world. Yes, he was destined. Yes, he was God's son. But back at the beginning, Jesus was the son of a carpenter, living in a little town out in a forgotten backwater of the mighty Roman empire. He was just a small-town guy who was stirred to action by the word of God and the injustice of a good man's arrest. And the men and women who followed him, who walked that journey with Jesus, they weren't particularly special. They were just every day, working class folks, who heard God's voice and dedicated their lives to spreading God's love and mercy and compassion.

All the stories of the Disciples, the Saints, the servants of God, they all have a beginning point, a point where they transitioned from being ordinary folks to being followers of Jesus Christ. How does your story of discipleship begin? Or if it hasn't started yet, what might be the event that inspires you to get up and move; to find your voice; to understand your role in the Kingdom. Maybe it hasn't happened yet. Maybe it has. Maybe your story begins here today.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and the world that is to come. Amen.