

Sermon for January 22, 2017
Matthew 4:12-23

On the surface, the life of Peter and Andrew, James and John is a picture of business as usual. They are simply going about their daily work of “fishing” with the usual challenges of casting their nets in an attempt to make a living and mending their nets as that activity faces the usual challenges. But it is that appearance of normality that is precisely the problem. For something big, world shattering and earth shaking is emerging before their very eyes. Jesus has entered their turf, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, making big messianic claims (“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near”). The Problem? Odds are they will dismiss his “coming near” to them. For “Galilee of the Gentiles,” as their land is also called, has heard that message before-and it has never panned out! Indeed, the apparent latest best hope wielding such a message, John the Baptist, has just been arrested. Indeed, seeing the fate of that message and its messengers in the past, it is quite logical that they might stick to their fishing, to what they know will get them a living, rather than follow another voice heralding the “kingdom of heaven.”

Of course, the outward choice to stick with business as usual is not simply a logical choice. It also indicates where their hearts are. Matthew gives us no direct indication at this time as to what the pair of brothers are clinging to within. We have not yet met them in Matthew’s story in a personal way, though we will later. All we have at this point is a generic signal of what people who live in “the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali” might be harboring within, generally, based on the choice of the Isaiah passage as the orienting text. The geographical reference from Isaiah does not simply identify a physical location. Much more, it indicates a condition of the heart and mind. Zebulun and Naphtali were the first tribes of Israel to experience exile. Exile was for them an inward experience of “sitting in deep darkness”, a time of emptiness, a life lived in obscurity. Words like “forsaken”, “lost” and “fear” appear in Matthew’s vocabulary to describe this. But more generally, Matthew does not go into much detail on the nature of the inward dimension of “unbelief.” For him, people who go about business as usual are simply in the dark about themselves and their situation. “Obscurity,” I think, is the best way to describe their inward condition. Unbelief, at least for these fishermen on the margins of society, is a state of obscurity. They don’t know what to believe or think about much of anything. They just go about their daily work in obscurity.

Of course, to live in obscurity is not to live in security-and neither is living in business as usual. Truth be told, ignorance is not bliss. What you don't know can hurt you- eventually. There is real danger lurking even as business as usually rolls on. Truth be told, not only are Peter and Andrew, James and John sitting in the obscurity of the darkness of their minds, Matthew, through Isaiah, also tells us that they are "sitting in the region of death". What characterizes the world as the "region of death" is not that it is void of God but that it is in opposition to God (and in league with Satan) and thus God-forsaken: bereft of God's blessing and possessed of God's curse. Exile, after all, is God's judgment upon a people who have forsaken God, even though the details of how they got there are-well-"obscure" to them. More to the point here, the world in which we live is like the sea. We live in the world the way fish live in the sea. It has an irresistible hold, a degree of necessity about it for sustaining business as usual, because we know that to leave it means certain, immediate death. However, to stay in the world is no solution to death either. At best it only postpones the inevitable; it can't overcome it. No wonder we cling to business as usual, settle for obscurity over clarity, and cling to clichés like "ignorance is bliss." What alternative we have?

Enter Jesus-the alternative to business as usual. He "withdraws to Galilee" not to flee the fate of John the Baptist (apparently another victory for the reign of death) but to begin to confront the reign of darkness and death head on. For those living in the region of darkness and death, his days of flight are over and his days of fight (that is, his unusual business of redemption through the cross) have just begun. Jesus calls his alternative the "kingdom of heaven". Of course, at this point in the story obscurity reigns as to how Jesus will both define and accomplish the kingdom. Only as we "follow him" (meaning, in this context, follow how his life's story unfolds), will the meaning of the kingdom of heaven come out of obscurity into some sense of clarity. Indeed, that is the whole reason why Matthew writes his Gospel-so we may follow this story for ourselves and judge its credibility. In the text at hand, we have a sample summary of part of Jesus' kingdom work as it unfolds: "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". These activities of Jesus signal only the beginning of his work to break the hold that the "reign of darkness and death" has on the people. There is much more to come! "Following him" means more than reading or hearing an isolated text; it means seeing and hearing all he has to do. It means

watching him as his work begins in Galilee and moves to Jerusalem. It means watching him as he moves nearer and nearer to those he has come to help: becoming the friend of sinners, joining them in their suffering, uniting with them on a cross of judgment, and finally, being placed in their tomb. But it's not over yet! It means watching him as he bursts from the tomb and takes the throne to begin his reign, the reign that is called heavenly because it is God's way of dispensing forgiveness and resurrection life. Only as we "follow him" (that is, his whole career, his whole work) will we begin to understand what he means by bringing near to us "the kingdom of heaven" as a genuine alternative to the reign of death.

Watching Jesus from a distance as described above, while historically interesting, still leaves us at a distance from him and his kingdom reign. Indeed, many people know of Jesus from a distance. Matthew will tell us repeatedly that the Pharisees watched him from a distance; that the Sanhedrin debated his deeds at great length from a distance; that many women observed his crucifixion at a distance; and that great effort was made by the religious leaders to keep the news of the empty tomb at a distance from the population in general. Simply knowing about Jesus and the kingdom of heaven from a distance does little good. The good news is nothing until it "draws near", until it gets up close and personal, until it becomes good news for us, good news in the heart. This personalizing of the Kingdom of heaven is what Matthew means by faith and it happens in a two-fold way: by call and response. "Follow me," said Jesus to the pair of brothers, and "immediately they left [business as usual] and followed him." What most surprises us here is not the "call" of Jesus per se but the immediacy of the "response" of the brothers. This immediacy is Matthew's way of telling us that faith is not like the hard, business logic that informed their day-to-day decisions. In a way that is incomprehensible, Jesus has now drawn near to them. He has somehow captured their hearts and minds in such a way that there is no darkness, doubt or obscurity whatsoever. Whatever was of first importance before, though obscurely, has now been replaced by Jesus clearly, like a "great light"-an aha!-going on in their mind. They were now clearly his. That's the nature of faith. Matthew does not explore the dynamics of conversion. He simply lets the immediacy of faith confront us with wonder like a miracle, perhaps the greatest miracle of all. Matthew's concern about the nature of faith lies elsewhere. He wants his readers to know that faith is never a static reality. Faith is "following Jesus." And in that sense faith is always a matter of being "discipled," of

constantly learning the meaning of Jesus' cross and resurrection in a practical way, a way marked by actual repentance which dispels any obscurity that lingers about our sinfulness and living freely, responsively to the call of the living Christ. In the metaphor of our text, believing is like being a fish caught in a net. It means being pulled out of the surf of business as usual which leads to death and onto the turf of the kingdom of heaven which leads to resurrection.

The outward expression of faith as following Jesus is as varied as the disciples themselves. The kingdom of heaven does not consist in a set of rules or a behavioral blueprint established from the start. Rather, Christian behavior is as spontaneous and unpredictable and surprising as faith itself. Yet, this much can be said in general about the outward character of Christian discipleship: Those who follow the call of Christ are authorized to call others to follow Christ. This is the meaning of the last part of Jesus' words to the fishermen: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people". This authorization is again given at the end of Matthew's Gospel when he issues the "Great Commission." As followers of Christ, we are the embodied, historical means by which Jesus continues to extend his call to all. It may mean leaving the particulars of daily work literally (as it did for Peter and Andrew, James and John) or it may not (as is the case for most of his followers). But it does mean that business as usual (mired in obscurity and death) is being overruled by the unusual business of Christ though every day believers—you and I.