

Come, Follow Me

I preach this morning in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

So today is the third Sunday of Epiphany. And the season of Epiphany is the season that we embrace the manifest presence of God in Christ that began twelve days after Christmas when the Magi came from the land of Persia, bearing their gifts of gold, incense and myrrh, and finalizes six weeks after when Jesus leads Peter, James and John up to Mount Tabor to be transfigured, to be changed in their presence.

Now today in our lesson, we continue in the season of Epiphany. And today in our lesson, it comes from the Holy Gospel of St. Matthew, the fourth chapter. And as always, I invite you to open up and to follow along with me, as I'll preaching through our lesson today verse by verse.

And while you're opening there in your bulletins, let me set the stage for you. Now, in Matthew Chapter 4, Jesus is beginning his earthly ministry. Two weeks ago, Jesus came to John to be baptized by John in the River Jordan, "and a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him. I am well pleased'" (Mt. 3:17). And from that moment on, Jesus began his earthly ministry. And when Jesus begins his earthly ministry, it was not in any way a walk in the park. When Jesus begins his earthly ministry, it was not writing his New York Times bestseller. No. When Jesus begins his earthly ministry, it was being led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. And Jesus took a stand on the authority of God's Word, what God's Word said, "and the devil left him, and the angels of the Lord attended to him" (Mt. 4:11).

And now in our lesson, Jesus gets word about his cousin John, that he has been put in prison. And so Jesus returns to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, Jesus goes and lives in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali.

And it is there that Jesus begins to preach. It is there that the light shines in the darkness.

Matthew Chapter 4, we begin in verse 12, “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali – to fulfill what was said through the Prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and Land of Naphtali, the Way to the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.’”

The light of Jesus shines the brightest in the darkest of places.

The light of Jesus Christ shines the brightest in the darkest of places. And Jesus gets word about his cousin John confronting Herod’s sin. And you know as well as I do, that never turns out very good. But he speaks the Word of the Lord, confronts Herod in his sin, he’s imprisoned, and Jesus knows that’s not going to end up very well for John.

In first century Rome, if you were in prison you probably wouldn’t get out to tell the story. Jesus knew that John wouldn’t make it out alive, and Jesus knew that he, himself, would not make it out alive because three years from now, not only would they imprison him, they would spit upon him, they would beat him, they would mutilate his flesh, they would crucify him, hanging him on a Roman cross to be killed, and he would shed his blood. And he knew that his imprisonment, not too long from now, would end up in the same way that it’s ending up for John.

But the light of Jesus shines the brightest in the darkest of places. It is here where the light of Christ shines bright. It is here that the promise of Isaiah is fulfilled, verse 15, “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way to the Sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

You see, here in Capernaum, where Jesus begins to preach, this has been the area in the territory of the Assyrians for years past. In the year 722 B.C., under the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the ruler Tiglath Pileser III, they came in and they destroyed the people of God. 10 of the 12 Tribes of Israel came to nothing. And today they're known as the 10 Lost Tribes, never to be remembered again.

722 B.C., Assyrian power comes in and wipes them away, takes them captive, sends them off into exile. But you see, it is here two of those tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali, were wiped away. But it is here in Capernaum, where the dominion of darkness has conquered for years, that the name of Jesus Christ is lifting up the kingdom of God. The light of Jesus Christ shines the brightest in the darkest of places.

How about you? What dark place are you in today?

What oppression has you down and out? What life experience are you living in today that would suggest to you that you are living in the land of the shadow of death?

I don't know what that looks like for you. Maybe your marriage is on the rocks. But, I have good news for you today – the light of Jesus Christ shines brighter. Maybe your children are addicted to drugs and alcohol. I have good news for you today – the name of Jesus Christ shines brighter. Maybe you have lost your job and you have no provision for a future – the light of Jesus Christ shines brighter than your challenge. It shines brighter than your situation. Maybe you have received a terminal diagnosis from the doctor, and there is no hope for you – the light of Jesus Christ shines brighter.

And the light of Jesus shines brighter because the light of Jesus is near. And the light of Jesus is near because the kingdom of God has come. And when the kingdom of God comes, He calls you first to repentance, verse 17, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'"

When the kingdom of God comes, the kingdom of God calls you to repentance. Now, repentance is not a change of moral behavior. Repentance is not an alteration of one's external conduct. Repentance is not that. Repentance is a change of mind. Repentance is a change of perception of the way in which you view life and any situation that you find yourself in. You see, repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of heart that results in a changed life.

I heard a story once of a man by the name of John who had a famous pet parrot. He loved his pet parrot. But this parrot, you couldn't get him under control. His mouth was foul, foul language left and right. He was afraid to have anyone over to the house because you never knew what this parrot was going to say. Well, John did everything he could to try to keep the parrot calm. He would turn music on. He would, you know, talk politely in conversations so maybe the parrot would learn good language. Well, that didn't work.

One day, things got a little heated and they started yelling at each other and John had enough. So he put the parrot in his hand and threw it in the freezer. And for a while, it squawked and squealed a little bit. Then, all of a sudden, there was silence. And then out of concern; he didn't want to hurt the parrot. So he opened up the freezer door and, to his surprise, out walks the parrot. The pet parrot steps up on the countertop and says, "Well, excuse me. I believe I may have offended you with my rude language and inappropriate behavior. I do intend with all of my intent to make amends to my life and my transgressions."

John was dismayed of what could have happened to cause this kind of change in the parrot's behavior. And before John could say anything to the parrot, the parrot continued, "Excuse me? Can you tell me what happened to the chicken in the freezer?"

Repentance.

Repentance is a change of mind, a change of perception that changes our hearts and changes the way that we live. When the kingdom of God calls you, the kingdom of God, first, calls you to repentance.

And when the kingdom of God calls, the kingdom of God, second, leads you to follow Jesus, verse 18, "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed him."

The kingdom of God, when it calls, the kingdom of God leads you to follow Jesus. Jesus shows up here in Capernaum. He begins his earthly ministry, and he begins by finding sinners.

Are you a sinner? You're in a good place because this is a church full of sinners, and your pastors are two of the chief sinners of our congregation. But I tell you, it's in the period, in that season of living in the grace of God, where your life is transformed. Every day, living in a reality unfolding before you of what it means to live in the grace of God.

You see, the kingdom of God, when it breaks into your life, you no longer say to yourself, "Well, I'm good. I'm holy, I'm righteous." No. You say, "I'm filthy. I'm a sinner. I'm chief among sinners. I need the Lord Jesus Christ. I need the kingdom of God and the light of His glory to shine in the darkest of places and the crevices of my heart. I need you, Lord." You see, this is following Jesus. When the kingdom of God comes to you, the kingdom of God finds sinners.

And Jesus found two sinners, Peter (Simon Peter) and Andrew. And they were doing what they knew to do – they were fishing. This was their livelihood. And Jesus tells them to take their nets, to take what they know, take what they're comfortable doing, take even what they're good at, and to "follow me" (Mt. 4:19).

What do you need to turn from so that you can turn to Jesus? What do you need to leave so that you can follow? Check out this video.

What is your net today? What is your net? What is your place of comfort? It may be your livelihood, like the disciples. It may be that area of comfort that you revert back to because you know that there's a place of peace there.

What is God calling you from, so that He can lead you to Jesus? And what will you leave to follow Him?

When the kingdom of God comes, the kingdom of God shines the brightest in the darkest of places. The kingdom of God calls you to repentance, calls you to a change of mind, calls you to a new perception of reality. The kingdom of God calls you, and leads you to follow Jesus, dropping your nets, and following Him.

And the kingdom of God reprioritizes your entire life, verse 21, "Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."

You see, when the kingdom of God calls, when the kingdom of God comes to you, it reprioritizes your entire life. Now, like Peter and Andrew, James and John were asked to drop their nets, to get out of the boat, and to follow Jesus. But unlike Peter and Andrew, James and John were asked to leave their father.

Now, understand what Jesus is saying and what he's not saying. Leaving their father was not dismissing their responsibilities as a son to honor mother and father as the Fourth Commandment tells us. Leaving father was not saying to Zebedee, "I want you no longer in my life. All the best to you, I'm following after Jesus." No. It was a reprioritizing of one's relationship with family out of a relationship with Jesus.

For the Lord, Himself, said in the First Commandment, "I am the Lord your God. Have no other gods besides me." This is what Jesus is saying. Family relationships are important, but they should never come before Me. Oneness with your spouse is what I have ordained, what I want for you, but it never should come in place of a relationship with your Creator. Having wonderful children and blessing your children with a wonderful relationship as mother and father, as important as it is, never should come before your relationship with Jesus Christ. Because, you see, out of your relationship with God, out of a restored relationship with your Heavenly Father, who sent Jesus Christ into the world to make all things right again, out of that relationship you can properly love your spouse. Out of that relationship and connection you have with your Heavenly Father, you can parent and steward the responsibilities given to you to lead your children and lead them in the admonition and the wisdom of the Lord.

You see, when the kingdom of God comes, it reprioritizes everything in your life so that out of your relationship with God flows everything else.

What in your life today – maybe a relationship, maybe it's your job, maybe it's something you do – what in your life today needs to be reprioritized so that Jesus can be the King of your heart?

What in your life today needs to be altered, as the Holy Spirit convicts you, so that you can live a life in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, where you can share the good news of Jesus Christ wherever God leads you, wherever God calls you, no matter what season or circumstance you find yourself in, even now, so that you can find everything you need out of that relationship, out of that connection with your Heavenly Father. You see, it is out of this relationship, and this relationship alone, that all of your needs, all of them, are met.

So, what needs to change in your life? You see, it's not about priorities, it's about priority. It's not about priorities A,B,C, D, E, F, G. It's about priority.

“God, You are the Lord, and out of You flows everything I need in this life.”
Today, the kingdom of God is coming to you, and when the kingdom of God comes to you, the light of Jesus shines in your darkness. The kingdom of God calls you to repentance: a change of mind, a change of perception. The kingdom of God leads you to follow Jesus more deeply and more intimately. And the kingdom of God reprioritizes everything in your life, so that today you can heed His call.

Come. Follow me.

Amen.