

Matthew 4:12-25

Setting It Up

About five hundred and fifty kilometers. That is the distance between St. Andrew's church in Thunder Bay and Minneapolis. Between five and six hours depending on how heavy your foot is. (Around 830 kilometers is you are in Geraldton) Things that we are hearing about happening to ordinary people in that city are alarming and it is not happening somewhere in some place that is unknown to us. It is just over the border, an imaginary line that, for the moment, is protecting us from the unimaginable...a federal government turning against its own people.

I will state here that some of you may disagree with me, but while I still hold a pulpit, today I will speak about the fear, the burdens, the hopelessness, the anger, and the lies. I have clergy colleagues who lined up at the airport in Minneapolis in resistance to what is happening in their beloved country and state. They are being arrested and it is making me consider what the cost is of being a follower of Jesus. Heck after the shooting of another innocent person in that city, I am wondering what the cost is for anyone that non-violently chooses to even document the actions of armed men given authority to act callously and cruelly, and as we have seen, at times ending in deadly force.

My heart is breaking.

These scenes are taking place not even a thousand miles from us.

On top of that each day we wake up not knowing what is going to happen this day. What world leader is going to say what or which country is safe or being targeted. Canada is one of those being targeted. And I will say what I have noted before, God did not create boundaries between people. People created and continue create boundaries to differentiate between culture and colour, wealthy and poor, straight and gay, worthy and unworthy. In God's eyes, each one of us is worth saving, each one of us is loved. And even as I write this, I think of those who cause harm and wonder, "God...how?"

But this is not for me to determine. That is God's work. Our work is to follow Jesus' call. For starters, we need to listen for the call and this scripture reading today is a starting place. In the Gospel of Matthew this scripture reading from chapter 4 was Jesus' starting place. Even the headings of the readings are about firsts...*Jesus Begins His Ministry in Galilee...Jesus Calls the First Disciples...Jesus Ministers to Crowds of People.*

The first words we hear from Jesus to people in this Gospel are "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt 4:17) They were the words of John the

Baptizer as well. But as Jesus comes into his own, John's ministry fades to the background. However, do not miss the fact that John had been arrested. His voice was being silenced. The Empire could not tolerate John and in time the Empire will take Jesus as well. Empire always wants to control the narrative and it will do what it takes to control the narrative even if that means brutality, force, and coercion. And know that it is my intention that you make some connections between Empire in Jesus' time and Empire in our own time.

And though the scripture may appear to make it seem that Jesus left Nazareth because of the situation, the scripture makes it clear that this move is in accordance with words the prophet Isaiah had spoken long before. This was land once called Zebulun and Naphtali, but it is now the area called Galilee. And here the prophet says, "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." (Matt. 4:16) Matthew is saying that Jesus is that light, the great light, the light of dawn.

Jesus has gone to a region that is rich in diversity of people. It is a place of roads and connections. In time, word of him will spread from this place to the seat of power in Rome and he will be killed. It is this Jesus who says to us, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Now that word repent has taken on all kinds of connotations, and none of them are attractive to us. We are told that it means we should be sorry, that is how most of us hear that word now. We are told that it means to do a 180 and turn away from sin and there is some value in that thinking.

Yet, if one were to take a look at the Greek word and its meaning in the time in which this gospel was written one finds that the word actually means to not just change one's mind, but to take on a whole new perspective. And the word is not just found in the gospel but also in other writing of the time and each time it means more and different from what we have learned...we are to take on a whole new perspective.

If we were to use common phrases today to describe what "repent" means we would use phrases like, "prepare to have your mind blown" or "wrap you mind around this."

In light of the context, this word repent means to take on a whole new perspective based in the work and person of Jesus as the Son of God. Get your mind wrapped around this way of seeing and understanding the world based on God's rules for kingdom. And if you are wondering what that looks like you just need to keep reading the scripture. It looks like people hearing Jesus call their name and say follow me and though it will cost them their lives as they know it, walking away from income and family, they do it. It is radical. We may not have the whole back story, but what we are given is a radical new way of seeing life and of doing life. And these verses are the set up for the whole Gospel of Matthew.

From there people and the disciples will witness as Jesus teaches in their synagogues and proclaims the good news of the kingdom, news that means freedom from oppression...a kingdom based in the value of people and creation, a kingdom based in love, forgiveness, grace, hope, and peace. This is the kingdom we are asked to share with others. This is not about coercion or force, power and might. This kingdom is about people loving people and loving because each person has value and is created by God whose love is deeper, wider, and higher than we could ever imagine.

Jesus showed what this loved looked like as he went about curing every disease and every sickness among the people and he did this for all who were brought to him, it did not matter from where they came. It did not matter if they were from the region of Galilee, or from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, or from beyond the Jordan.

I don't often use these words, but I beg of you to see and hear these words and stories of Jesus from a new perspective. The world has always had chaos. However, we, especially here in Canada and the US, have been so privileged in the aftermath of WWII to live in countries that have been relatively immune from the world's harms. Though, that could not be said of the indigenous people of this land and many an immigrant of colour would tell you of a different experience. Still, in our own time, the power of empire, the power of wealth, both and more are threatening to change the dynamics. And it is a wake up call for us. We have been able to let the Ukraine be the Ukraine, and Gaza be Gaza, but now we are feeling the pressures.

As Christians, as people who have answered Christ's call to follow, what does that look like in our own time, in our own land, in our own community. As temperatures plummet and people are freezing, as we fight over in whose back yard a temporary tiny home village can be built, as we fight over funding for supports, education, and health care, where do we stand?

We are called just as Simon, Andrew, James and John were. We are called from our knowns to unknowns, we are called to follow into some challenging, and in this day and age, possibly even deadly situations. Renee Good and Alex Pretti were people showing up in non violent ways to be present for others. They were gunned down for it. And if you are in disagreement with me, I am okay with that. I will speak truth into the world.

We are living at a time when we can no longer just sit back and say, "that is not my problem". We never should have felt that way. We are part of a common humanity; each person created in the image of God. The difficulty starts for us when we see someone as less than. Even those who are answering the call to take up arms against their fellow citizens are each a child of God. It does not mean that there are not consequences to our actions and choices. We all have to answer for our choices. It does mean that some people are able to make choices from a place of authority and power, privilege and comfort, while others are given fewer choices, and less power to change their situation. Do not for a moment think that we have equal opportunity to change our situations.

However, that does not mean that we are freed from our obligation, our call from God to work toward a world where the kingdom of heaven will come to earth. We pray that each time we say the Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come...thy kingdom come...thy will be done...on earth...as it is in heaven."

We bring the kingdom each time we speak for the least of these, when we teach about love, value, hope, peace, and yes, even joy. We bring the kingdom each time we speak healing words, or bring food to the needy, warm a body, or even protect someone who has fallen. We bring the kingdom whenever we bring protection to the vulnerable. We bring the kingdom each time we love fully.

The call is to the kingdom of God and to bring that about on earth. This is dangerous work. This work led both John the Baptist and Jesus to their deaths. It has led many others to death around the world. The work of love is dangerous work. It is not the work of Empire; it is the work of ordinary people. As ordinary as the fishermen who dropped their nets and followed Jesus.

I don't know how God is going to call you into the work of the kingdom of love and light, but know that each of us is called to it. If you are listening to this today, you are called. We are not only called as individuals, but we are called as community, as people working together. As one, we are easily overwhelmed, together were more. Your act of kindness and love, together with another act of kindness and love, with my act of kindness and love, all of us working toward justice for the most vulnerable, that will make a difference. It is dangerous work we are called to; it may even take your life. I ask you to consider, how is God asking you to show up, how is God asking our congregation, this faith community to show up and be the kingdom of love and light here on earth.

I don't have specific answers, but I pray that God would pour out blessings of wisdom upon us in our own time, that we can have courage, faith, and the willingness to be who we are called to be in community and with community as we figure it out, and to not let darkness overcome. We shall overcome. Do not let go of hope. Do not let go of the light and bring the love of God into the world.

I speak to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen and Amen.