

The Work Begins
Matthew 4:17-25
January 29, 2017 – Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Our Gospel Lesson for today marks the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry as recorded by Matthew. But like any good introduction, these nine verses don't simply start the story. Rather, they identify three ways in which Jesus will carry out his commission to manifest God's saving presence in the world. You remember that commission? I mentioned it back before Christmas, when the angel told Joseph that Mary would bear a son by the Holy Spirit, and he would save the people from their sins. So today the work begins – three ways Jesus will carry out his commission to “save the people from their sins”:

- 1) He publicly announces the reign or empire or kingdom of God.
- 2) He forms an alternative community of disciples committed to God's rule.
- 3) He begins to transform the Roman-dominated world, teaching people about God's grace and mercy and demonstrating God's saving purposes by healings and exorcisms.¹

Jesus first public pronouncement, as reported in Matthew's Gospel was: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” I note that similar words begin Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark; but a word about the semantics – What the other Gospels refer to as the kingdom of God, Matthew consistently refers to as the kingdom of heaven. I caution you about trying to read too much into this. Heaven is God's realm, God's empire. With the recognition of some minor theological differences on the part of the Gospel writers, we can equate the kingdom of heaven with the kingdom of God.

Now, to you and I who are accustomed to hearing this term – kingdom of God, it doesn't wave any red flags. But to the people of the late first century, when they heard that the kingdom of God has come near, said: “Wait a minute. This is Caesar's kingdom; and for that matter, Caesar is God.” When Jesus says, “The kingdom of God has come near,” he's setting himself up in opposition to the emperor, in opposition to the civil authority. He's saying repent. Turn away from your current ways, and I will show you a better way, a more loving way, a more peaceful way, the way of the one and only true God.

So Jesus begins what will be his central theme throughout the Gospel – the proclamation of the kingdom of God. This is followed immediately by the calling of the first disciples. He was walking by the sea when he saw Simon Peter and his brother Andrew out fishing. He uttered that famous line – “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” and immediately they left their nets and followed him.

¹ Warren Carter, *Pastor's Bible Study, Vol. 1* (Nashville, Abingdon Press: 2004) 21.

Wow. What kind of charisma did Jesus have, to convince the two brothers to drop everything, their entire means of making a living, and follow this itinerant preacher for Nazareth? For those of us who value stability, security, and self-care, such actions seem absolutely crazy. But there is no question that Jesus gathered such followers; and had he not, we would not be professing Christians today.

A little further down the shore, he came upon James and John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He calls them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Did you ever wonder what Zebedee thought of this whole situation. He must have been dependent on his sons to help with the fishing business. His workforce has just walked off the job to follow some sidewalk preacher from Nazareth. Did he try to talk them out of leaving? Or did he send them with his blessing? We simply don't know. One commentator I read actually suggested that, in taking followers off their routine jobs, Jesus was upsetting the economic stability of the region – again a case of God vs. civil rule.² I find this a little difficult to believe. I don't think Jesus had enough full-time followers to truly upset the regional economics; but certainly following Jesus was an extreme move and a counter-cultural move for the men and women who did so.

And finally, at the end of chapter four, we hear what this ministry and this kingdom of God is all about. Jesus went throughout Galilee, throughout the region, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom; and he backed up the good news with proof – curing every disease and sickness among the people, healing those who were afflicted with diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics, and all the rest. And great crowd followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

And so, with these nine verses, Matthew gives us an introduction to the next 24 chapters of the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But, as you well know by now, I will not leave the Gospel in the first century. Yes, I believe with all my heart that the writings of sacred scripture have a message for us twenty centuries later. The Kingdom of God has come near. I've said it before. We pray it every Sunday – “Thy kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.” We can debate where we are with the kingdom of God on a corporate/community level; but on a personal level, I see this from two sides. First, I have continually stated that the most important verse in the Gospel is the last verse of Matthew – “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” The Spirit of the Risen Christ is always with us, in the good times and in the bad, in the happy times and in the sad, walking beside us, supporting us, strengthening us, loving us. With that in mind, I tell you that, on a personal level, the kingdom of God is indeed near us. And, the other side of that same coin – if we truly embrace the kingdom, we cannot help spreading the kingdom to others – the love, the care, the faith, the hope, the support which God

² *ibid.*

in Christ offers. Yes, the kingdom of God has come near, and it is our call to further that kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven.

Furthermore, it's often been said: "Jesus did not work alone." Jesus recruited followers. Jesus built a community; and that's why we're here. We're here as a result of that community, and we're here in community because, when it comes to the church, the whole truly is greater than the sum of the parts. As often as I preach that we, as individuals should radiate the love of Christ; I also recognize that we as the church together can do a huge amount toward furthering the kingdom of God on earth. That's why I do what I do. That's why I accepted the call to ordination. But, as I have repeatedly said, I also believe we all have a divine call, to use the gifts and graces that God has given us, to share the Good News, to spread the kingdom of God.

Finally, I tell you that I believe you and I individually and collectively have the power to change the world. Oh, I'm not so naïve to think that I'm going to turn the world upside down, but I do believe that we can all leave the world a little better for having been here. It's been a while since I've mentioned what I call the logarithmic scale of kindness. We don't need to change the world. We only need to change the lives of two people. Then, if each of those people changes the lives of two people and each of those people change the lives of two people, it only takes thirty some reiterations of changing lives, two people at a time, to touch every person in the world.

Now, I know that most of you have already changed the lives of two people, and more. . . children, grandchildren, other friends and relative. Teachers, you may not be able to count the number of lives you've change. But, that's not an excuse to stop. Keep answering the call. Keep sharing the good news. Keep radiating the love. Keep changing lives; and the world will be a better place.

It's time for the work to begin. Praise be to God for the gift of Jesus Christ and the opportunities to follow as we give God all the glory.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,
Lead us and guide us,
as we seek to follow you,
to bring the kingdom ever closer to reality,
to change the world by radiating your love
to all whom we meet, every day of our lives.
Amen.

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