

WHEN JESUS BEGAN

Matthew 4:12-22

A homily given by Larry R. Hayward on January 22, 2017, the Third Sunday after Epiphany, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
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.’*

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

As 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 lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’

Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

During the weekend in which our nation recognizes the inauguration of a new President, the Christian Church around the world is in a season of focusing on the beginnings of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

- Two Sundays ago, we remembered Jesus’ baptism, and focused on the meaning of this sacrament, particularly pertaining to infants.
- Last Sunday, we focused on another aspect of Jesus’ beginnings, as John the Baptist pointed to him as “Lamb of God” who “takes away” [or “lifts up for inspection”] the sins of the world.¹
- Today we follow Jesus as he utters the first words of his ministry – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” and as he calls his first disciples with equally compelling words – “Follow Thou me.”
- In upcoming weeks, we will look at his early and best known teaching – the Sermon on the Mount.

Both the *inauguration* of a President and the *beginnings* of Jesus’ ministry remind us that beginnings – all beginnings – are important.

Let us pray: *Lord, in our beginnings and in our endings, in all we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

¹ John 1:29-42.

I.

The first thing to notice about the beginnings of Jesus' ministry in that in Matthew's Gospel, his ministry does not begin under the most congenial of circumstances. "When Jesus *heard* that John had been *arrested*," Matthew writes, "Jesus *began* to proclaim..."

A friend of mine writes:

Jesus inaugurates his ministry by *preaching* the gospel.

The gospel is *not* a reaction to [the threat of] Herod.

[Rather] ...the gospel...is *independent of* but not *isolated from* the [political circumstances of its day], with its own internal *coherence* and *hope*.²

We live in a particular moment in our country where

- Many are hopeful about a new administration, under the leadership of a President who has come from outside politics, who is a person of action, who has promised to do things differently and to rule with a particular type of strength, and who enters office with the party he represents holding majorities in both houses of Congress.
- Others are uncomfortable, apprehensive, offended by his style if not the content of his policies.
- Still others are waiting to see what will happen, giving the new President the chance to lead and govern.

Christians of good conscience in our congregation and across our nation are found within these three groupings of citizens and voters.

In his monumental work, *Christ and Culture*, Richard Niebuhr wrote:

...it is an aberration of *faith*...to *absolutize the finite*

But... [the] *relative history of finite [people]*...[Niebuhr adds] is under the governance of the *absolute* God.

When Jesus Christ begins his ministry, the Herod whose father had ordered the death of children³ had succeeded in arresting Jesus' forerunner John the Baptist, and would later put John to death.⁴ But even then Jesus' ministry is not a reaction against the power of Herod.

- His ministry has its own internal call.
- It has its own internal coherence.
- It has its own internal consistency.

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² Chandler Stokes, Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, paper on Matthew 4:12-22, January 2017.

³ Matthew 2:16-23.

⁴ Matthew 14:1-12.

In Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Animal Dreams*, a woman named Hallie is living in Nicaragua at the time of the Contra War. She writes her sister in the United States:

...you're thinking of revolution as a great all-or-nothing. I think of it as one more morning in a muggy cotton field, checking the undersides of leaves to see what's been there, figuring out what to do that won't clear a path for worse problems next week. Right now that's what I do.... Wars and elections are both *too big* and *too small* to matter in the long run.

She continues:

The *daily work* that goes on, it all adds up. It goes into the ground, into crops, into children's bellies and their bright eyes. Good things don't get lost....⁵

Jesus' ministry is *independent of* but not *isolated from* the political circumstances of his day. "The daily work that goes on, it all adds up."

II.

While Jesus' began his ministry with a call to repentance, he does not utter those words right off the bat. Rather, as Matthew narrates, "When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he *withdrew* to Galilee." Before Jesus begins the work of his life, he withdraws for a period of retreat, renewal, sanctuary.

Matthew not only tells us that Jesus "withdraws," but he walks us through a map of the place to which Jesus withdraws:

...left *Nazareth*
...made his home in *Capernaum* by the lake,
In the territory of *Zebulun* and *Naphtali*,
On the *road* by the *sea*,
Across the *Jordan*,
Galilee of the *Gentiles*.

When we hear these names, they are simply towns on a map for most of us. Yet the key phrase is "Galilee of the Gentiles."

- You see, Matthew's is the most Jewish of the Gospels.
- It is written for the Jewish community and depicts Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of the people of Israel.
- When Matthew says Jesus "made his home in Capernaum," he is pointing out that Jesus chooses to return to the region of his childhood home, even though that region is currently ruled by the Romans (who are Gentile).
- Thus, while Jesus is returning home for retreat and sanctuary, the home to which he is returning is no less dangerous than the place where John has been arrested.

⁵ Thanks to Chandler Stokes for this illustration.

Yet, it is precisely in this territory of danger, that Matthew recalls God's promise to Isaiah, a promise made in a similarly dangerous time earlier in history:

Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali...⁶
Galilee of the Gentiles,
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.⁷

Despite the fact that *home* is ruled by the Romans, Jesus returns *home* for renewal and retreat, for *home* is the place of sanctuary, *home* is the place where he was reared, *home* is the place from which he would set out and begin the work of his life, *home* is the place on which God promises to shine light in the future as God has shined light in the past.

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.

This is what Jesus receives in his retreat, his sanctuary, his return *home*.

III.

Matthew doesn't specify how long Jesus' retreat lasts, but it doesn't last forever. At some point, Jesus emerges to proclaim

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

And as he walks by the Sea of Galilee, he sees two fishermen, Simon and Andrew, and he calls to them:

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

And immediately, Matthew says, they leave their nets and follow. As do James and John.

With *their* decision to follow, the focus of the text moves from *Jesus* who calls people to the *people* who accept that call. The beginning of his ministry is not just about Jesus. It is also about those who hear and follow.

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When we pay attention to this scene, we cannot help but join others over the centuries who wonder why these four fishermen follow *immediately*. How is it possible, we ask, that Simon and Andrew, James and John, would

⁶ The small village of Capernaum is located in Zebulun and Naphtali. These are Israelite tribes who received allocations of land when Israel entered the Promised Land (Joshua 19:1-16, 32-39). Jesus is thus in the land which God has given, over which God should have sovereignty, which is now claimed by Rome. It is Galilee "under the Gentiles," marked by darkness and death, the taxes and control of occupation. See Matthew 4:12-16n in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

⁷ Matthew is quoting Isaiah 9:1-2, spoke to Israel during the Exile.

leave their *nets*, their *boats*, their *fishing business*, and in the case of James and John, their *father* to follow this man who had simply said “Follow me...”?

- Were they already aware of Jesus?
- Had they listened to the preaching of John the Baptist?
- Had they made a prior decision to follow of which this scene is simply the implementation?

Matthew doesn't give us answers, but follow they do. *Immediately*. And why would they leave so much behind?

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Many years ago in a former church, there was a boy named Rob who was enough of a handful that adults around him always had to take his personality into account whenever they were responsible for teaching a class he was in, coaching a team on which he played, leading a scout troop of which he was part.

My first Sunday at that church I gave the Children's Sermon. Rob came down for it and as others sat down, Rob remained standing. He crossed his arms.

“Are you the new guy?”

“Yes, I'm the new guy.”

“This is my church.”

A few years later, at a Children's Sermon, on our passage today, I asked “Why do you think James and John and Peter and Andrew left their fishing boats behind?”

There was prolonged period of silence and stares, which is what usually accompanies my children's sermons.

Then, from the back, Rob raised his hand and spoke almost in a whisper: “In order to follow Jesus, you have to leave something behind.”

Nets. Boats. Business. Sometimes even family.

“In order to follow Jesus,
You have to leave something behind.”

Amen.