

“Follow Me”
Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18;
Matthew 4:12-23

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As we have been walking into this new year, we have been thinking about how we can begin to engage with the child that came, whose birth we celebrated at Christmas. I'm calling this sermon series “Engaging Jesus.” We have been thinking about who it is that we're engaging; who it is that we're thinking about, remembering, and encountering.

Two weeks ago, we were reminded that the Spirit came down and identified Jesus as “my son with whom I am well pleased.” As Jesus began to go throughout the countryside, people began to encounter him. We talked last week about how there was an invitation and that people felt cleaned in his presence, felt new. At the end of today's passage, we hear about the healing and announcement of the good news. Because those who met Jesus had a change in perspective, they recognized their giftedness and they were inducted into this fellowship. They felt the fellowship through being together in Jesus' presence.

We have a sense that there's something that Jesus was about, and that people noticed. They gathered around him and were experiencing these things. One of the ways he announced what he was about in Matthew, the very first thing we hear Jesus offering, is that it's time to repent for the kingdom is at hand. Repent, for the kingdom is at hand. What does that mean? What is he saying?

First, the kingdom of heaven is at hand, the kingdom of God, the place where God is present and in charge. But then he also talks about repentance. Repentance is that idea that I'm going to make a turn. I'm going to change my direction in thought and behavior. I think we are fairly familiar with both the kingdom and changing. We think about the need for change in our lives sometimes, particularly at New Years. We try to set resolutions.

What does it mean for the kingdom to be at hand? Sometimes we see it translated as “the kingdom has come near.” The word there means it has come really close. Or perhaps it means it has come; it has already happened. It has a sense of movement to it. Coming close. It's like the old joke: How does somebody get across a room? If you're a mathematician, if you go half-way each time, you're never going to get there. But in reality, you do. In a way, that's the idea behind the kingdom. It's not only coming close, perhaps it's even present.

Jesus is announcing God's presence, announcing that we are in God's kingdom. He's inviting us to turn to it, to recognize it and its presence with us. In doing that, he invites people to follow him, particularly fishermen. I have read this passage multiple times, and it's interesting to me how I can read a passage and suddenly find that it's telling me something new. As I was thinking about the nature of what Jesus was inviting them to do and the nature of what they did as fishermen, I looked back at the word for fisherman. It is really more that they were sailors, folks who negotiated the

sea. Because they were sailors, they were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. So, they were people who went out on the sea, and on the sea they worked together to throw their nets and draw in the fish. They had to do a lot of hard work. They were diligent and patient, and worked together to draw the fish out of the water.

The hard part about this analogy for me is, once you draw those fish out, what are you going to do with them? You either take them and sell them, or go and eat them. There's something that doesn't quite fit for me because there is something Jesus is inviting them to do that is different than catching people to sell them for food. This isn't what this is about. But if we look at the idea of what a sea meant, oftentimes the sea was the place that was evil and chaotic and represented death. If you are being netted out of that, what are you being netted to? We know throughout scripture it's about being rescued. It's about being given new life. I think that's what Jesus is about. This story, in fact, is about trying to throw a net to those in need. To help them find the good life, the good news that Jesus is bringing. That's what he goes around talking about. He wants to bring good news and healing. It's just another way of thinking about what it means to throw nets into the sea and to be fishers of people—to bring good news and healing.

If you think about what those disciples were doing, it was hard work. Day after day. It wasn't all that lucrative. People didn't always appreciate those fishermen. I think they were considered unclean because of the kind of work they did. It's interesting to me, as Jesus invites his disciples to follow him, I don't think he was inviting them to lucrative careers. Perhaps he was inviting them to a different kind of hard work. If we listen to what Paul experiences, he certainly didn't seem to have an easy life.

I went to the movie *Just Mercy* a week ago and recognized that there are people who give their lives to do something when they could have made a lot more money doing something else. *Just Mercy* is about a Harvard-trained lawyer, Brian Williamson, who decided to go to Alabama and work to get unjustly convicted people off of death row. In the movie, you see a couple of people who are there simply because they were the right color to blame. He makes it his life's work to help people like this. He could have made a lot more money in corporate law. He could have made a lot more money in almost any other kind of law, probably. It's interesting how often it is that the helping professions are the places where people are not paid so well—for example, our teachers, people who care for children.

When he invites us to follow him, Jesus does not invite us to a lucrative career. Sometimes hard to care for people, or we may even find that caring for people gets in the way of making money. That gets me to an interesting issue. It's easy to celebrate the idea of Jesus' coming and to celebrate the idea that we should love and care for each other, but then, to try to put it in practice, to decide how we actually live our lives, can be a little more difficult. We begin to look for ways to make it happen. My guess is we all end up looking here or there, finding some leader or other to try to follow. We begin to take advice from one place for another. It was happening in Corinth, and from what Paul says, it was tearing them apart. There was a divisiveness of going after different people, different directions, different ways of practicing their faith.

Yet, Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is here." The kingdom of God is here. What does that mean to us? When I think of the kingdom of God being here, I think about the idea that if we set up the throne and God or Jesus were here, and I were to come to talk to him about my life, what would I say? What kinds of choices would I say I am going to make? I sometimes think I would veer away from some things and talk more about others if I really believed God was here and present.

When I was a child, I grew up in the church and there was a time when I think I believed pretty fully that God was present. There was one time when I wanted to go out and play in the woods, but I wanted to make it a little more exciting. I went to my mother's drawer and took out one of the big knives to put in my belt. As I took it, I thought, "I know this is wrong, but God, please. I think you'll be okay with it." Nothing happened. I took it out; I put it back. But how often do I make that choice today? "God, what do you think about this?" How do I see the world through the ministry and life of Jesus first?

There are a lot of people to follow today. The following has taken on a different meaning these days. I can follow somebody on Instagram. I can follow somebody on Facebook. I can follow somebody on Twitter. I can follow somebody's blog. I can follow people in all kinds of different ways. We know what that means. It means I'm going to pay attention to somebody who is posting something. I'm going to pay attention to a particular source of news or entertainment or fashion or whatever.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? If I were following Jesus as much as I follow some people online, maybe I'd be reading what he said more often. I'll admit I probably need to do that more. Maybe following Jesus is sometimes praying and listening. Sometimes I think following Jesus is being in fellowship with the fellowship of Christ.

I went through that list at the beginning about the things that people were experiencing by encountering Jesus. Last week I invited us to think about the fact that we're the body of Christ. We're the place where people get to encounter Jesus, encounter the light of God. But then I wonder how I do that. How do I do each piece of my life? How often do I ask God, whatever drawer I'm opening, "Jesus, how do I follow you?" Because I believe it is as I follow Jesus, as I really take seriously what he tells us, that it gives perspective on everything else. It might even change what I do, change who I am. I certainly hope it has. I certainly believe I could have been somebody else. I certainly believe that following him has made a difference, and will. Amen.