

January 26, 2020 – Isaiah 9:1-4 & Matthew 4:12-25

Telling people that you've decided to go to seminary and become a Lutheran pastor produces a variety of responses. Not always the ones you expect. One of my favorite college professors reacted with complete and utter disdain when he learned the news. Another who I really didn't know very well sought me out with excitement and support.

My friends and family were equally mixed. Some were skeptical. Some were confused. Some were happy for me. Some were just ambivalent. Like I said: lots of reaction.

But generally speaking, nothing too dramatic. After all, I was a college student. One without any particular career ambitions or direction at that point. I was at an age when these kinds of life choices need to be made and pursued.

I say all this because, as I was reading our Gospel lesson today, I began to wonder how my experience with my family and friends compared to that of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. In their own way, they were heading off to seminary as well. But it wouldn't be a formal education on a campus in St Louis.

It would be a life of discipleship, working under a rabbi. Something closer to an apprenticeship. Where they would leave everything behind to follow him. Learning at his feet. Doing whatever he told them.

And they were not college students looking for their path in life. No, these four men were all part of a good and honest profession. They were fishermen. They had experience on the Sea of Galilee. They had boats and nets and all the equipment they needed. They had a base of operations in the fishing village of Capernaum.

This was their career. It wasn't the highest paying job in the world. They would never become wealthy or powerful as fishermen. But it paid the bills. It put food on the table. It provided enough of a future that Peter felt comfortable settling down and getting married. This was their life.

And they threw it all away. That's at least how I think some of their families must have seen this. I can't imagine that Peter's mother-in-law was thrilled that he had run off to follow some rabbi all over Galilee and Judea. I have to think Zebedee was at least a little upset that his sons were abandoning the family business.

And that's exactly what they do. Jesus says, "Follow me," and they drop everything to follow him. It really is that sudden. *"Immediately they left their nets and followed him,"* Matthew says. *"Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him,"* he repeats a little later.

If this were Mark's gospel, we might not make a big deal about this. Mark uses the word "immediately" as a transition word. Everybody does everything "immediately" in Mark's gospel. It's not something to really highlight.

But that's not the case in Matthew's gospel. When Matthew says "immediately," he means "immediately." So this is a rather stunning choice of action for these four men. Four men with careers and families and homes. Who immediately leave everything to follow Jesus' call.

Why? Was this an act of the Holy Spirit? Prompting them? Pushing them out the door? Compelling them to follow Jesus when they otherwise would have ignored him, or at least acted much more slowly?

Well, yes and no. No, I don't think the Holy Spirit was quite that forceful in how He acted upon them. Making them do something crazy and against their better judgement. But I do think the Holy Spirit was at work.

He was at work through Jesus' own words. You see, we tend to assume this was their very first encounter with Jesus. But there's no reason to think that. Matthew is very clear that Jesus has already been preaching Capernaum. And his message was clear and powerful: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

The Word of God was already working on these men when Jesus called to them. And that Word was showing them exactly what Matthew shows to us at the beginning of this passage: They were living in darkness. Deep darkness, Isaiah says in Hebrew.

Have you ever been in a truly pitch black location? When I was a kid, I liked to go visit caves. And I remember going to one in particular. Part of Mammoth Caves in Kentucky.

You're walking along. You turn a corner. And suddenly there is no light at all. None. Your eyes desperately try to adjust, but there's nothing to adjust to. There is no light. And I remember, in that moment, feeling claustrophobic for the first time in my life.

I had been in lots of caves before. Been in lots of tight spaces. It didn't bother me... as long as I had some light. But without light, the darkness itself just seem to crush you.

I think that's what Isaiah is describing. A land of darkness. Deep darkness. Where the dark seems to crush you. Because there is no light at all. There is only sin. There is only anguish. There is only the shadow of death.

When these men see Jesus. When they hear him say “repent.” They realize that there is nothing in their lives except sin. It surrounds them. It crushes them. It blinds them. It makes them feel claustrophobic. Because it's not just all around them. It's inside them too. They are living without any light at all.

Until he brings them light: *“The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* And suddenly, there is light in the darkness. There is hope in the midst of hopelessness. There is a reason for joy, and not just sorrow.

Because the kingdom of heaven is here. It's at hand. It's so close you can reach out and touch it. In fact, as they will come to learn, it is standing right in front of them. In the incarnate Son of God.

He is the king of heaven. And He is at hand. And where He goes, the kingdom of heaven goes. Where He shines the light of the gospel, the darkness of sin is overcome.

And that's what Matthew is emphasizing in this laundry list of illnesses and suffering. Disease and affliction. Sickness and pain. Demon possession. Seizures. Paralysis. Jesus overcomes them all. There is no darkness He cannot drive out. There is no place that the kingdom of heaven can't go.

The kingdom of heaven can go everywhere. Even to the cross of calvary. Even to the gates of hell. Even to death itself.

For the Lord who overcame every sickness and affliction He encountered overcame the greatest sickness and affliction of man when He overcame our sin. When He overcame our grave. When He overcame the tomb and rose on easter morning. And showed all of creation that He king of heaven and earth and everything under the earth. And His kingdom shall reign forever.

If the king is there, the kingdom is there. And the king goes to everyone. The king goes everywhere. Even to Galilee of the Gentiles. Even to ordinary fishermen trapped in darkness. Even to you and me.

So maybe it's not so crazy that these four disciples would drop everything to follow Jesus. Maybe it's not so irrational that they would hear Him say, “Come, follow me,” and then immediately follow Him. Because what they saw in Jesus was not just a rabbi. It was not just a change of career. It was not just an opportunity to do something new with their lives.

No, what they saw in Jesus was a new life. They saw in Jesus light in their darkness. They saw in Jesus the kingdom of heaven. And they were going to follow that life, that light, that kingdom wherever it went.

We still live in that same dark world as Peter, Andrew, James, and John. We still feel that darkness around us. We still feel that darkness within us. Crushing us with sin and anguish and the shadow of death.

But I am here to tell you with the voice of my Lord, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" Repent, for you are more than your sins. You are a child of the most high God and an heir to His kingdom. So turn from the darkness. Look into the light of His gospel.

And know that there is nothing in all the world that can overcome His love. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is here, right now. Where His Word is preached and His sacraments administered. And it is coming again on the clouds of glory. And not sin, not anguish, not the shadow of death itself will prevail against that day. Amen.