

Casting + Mending
Matthew 4.12-23
Sunday, January 22, 2017
Epiphany 3A
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There are seasons of a pastor's year that are sometimes heavy with funerals, and I am standing in between remembering one fine man yesterday and another dear man on Friday of this week. It is a sacred task and one that always invites me most fully into the center of my calling. For the almost 20 years, it is walking into that holy space with friends and family to release someone they love that I find I most deeply believe the words and ways we profess here. At the end of a long life well-lived or a young life cut short, the gathered community knows what matters most and what is excess to be shaken off and released. In the days and weeks of saying goodbye, the priorities center around time shared together. The way a person made others feel when he was near. The prayers shared at table before a meal. The way a sister listened. The way a mother cared. The secrets and jokes shared closely between true loves. These are the things that matter most in the last days.

At a funeral, I will sometimes read from the book of Deuteronomy of Moses' last days:

Moses climbed from the Plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, the peak of Pisgah facing Jericho. God showed him all the land from Gilead to Dan...as far south as Zoar.

Then and there God said to him, "This is the land I promised to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the words 'I will give it to your descendants.' I've let you see it with your own eyes. There it is. But you're not going to go in."

Moses died there in the land of Moab, Moses the servant of God, just as God said.

Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eyesight was sharp; he still walked with a spring in his step. The People of Israel wept for Moses in the Plains of Moab thirty days. Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses came to an end.¹

I remind the family and friends gathered before me that they are the promised descendants who will continue to live out the promises of God, and the one they lost saw that promise being lived out in them. And in the honesty of final moments, we

¹ Deuteronomy 34.1-8

know it is true. We feel how true the words are that God is moving and breathing and pulsing within us and around us, guiding us forward, stirring our hearts within us. And in that moment, we know that God will continue to move and stir and breathe and pulse. But it doesn't take long before we forget again and need to be reminded.

Now in Matthew 4, we are called back to the words of Deuteronomy 34 as the gospel writer sets Jesus within a very specific place. Jesus is walking through the land God showed Moses. The land that welcomed Moses' ancestors. The land marked holy and promised by God as a gift. Rome is managing the territory now, and it isn't pretty. Lives are hard and short. Work is difficult and long. Income is stolen by the empire as oppressive tax with plenty of tips and bribes along the way up to the king.

Matthew name these places to remind us that Jesus is walking the land "that God had sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had shown to Moses (Deuteronomy 34:1-4), and [later] were assigned by Joshua (Joshua 19:10-16, Zebulun; 19:32-39). These covenant-evoking names frame the land as divine gift yet this land is now occupied by imperial powers."²

Jesus emerges onto the scene as one called "God with us" and "beloved son" in a very particular place, and Matthew's audience would have immediately heard the significance. He was waking them up to a memory, a hope, a promise that many of them had either forgotten or never realized was truly theirs. This world as you know it is not the real thing. The despair of oppression, the injustice of work for little income, the toxic rule of the emperor, the hopelessness of life ever being any different—this is not of God. God does not bless what is happening here. In fact, God is at work all around you and invites you to join the work of a different kingdom. These words were call for an invisible revolution.

Professor of New Testament Warren Carter comments on the layers of this gospel text: "Matthew's Gospel, written in the 80s [of the 1st century CE], cites Isaiah 9:1-2 to describe Roman rule as 'darkness' and 'death.' It positions Jesus, at the beginning of his public ministry, as the light or saving presence that shines in the darkness of Rome's imperial domination. Jesus asserts God's light or saving rule in Roman Galilee."

Jesus then proclaims that God's empire is not connected to the empire now controlling the promised land. Put broadly, God's empire is vastly different than the empires of this world. Empire, kingdom, rule, reign are all interchangeable here. The rulers of this world are not God. And God's ways are separate and distinct from the rulers of this

² Warren Carter, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3138

world. Jesus and Matthew are both being very clear about that here, and the invitation is absolutely just as true for us today. God's ways are separate and distinct from the rulers of this world. The invitation before us is to follow the path of God, hidden though it may be, even and especially when doing so becomes an act of revolution.

What does Jesus do in the face of an oppressive, tyrannical, powerful empire?

First: He invites people to imagine a God-breathed alternative. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" Turn from the path you are on and step onto the path of God. Pivot. Reorient. Change direction. Imagine a different and better way. Follow the light of Christ and watch it move throughout the darkness.

Second: He invites people to follow him into that alternative. He encounters people who are in the midst of their work, work that is being watched and heavily taxed by representatives of the empire. Work that is physically difficult and requires skill, generational knowledge shared from father to son, intuition of where to fish and when to wait. He encounters two men who are casting their nets and two other men who are mending theirs. These are skills needed in the work of the God kingdom—the work of healing and repairing, the work of going out and welcoming in. He sees these men not as cogs in a machine who can produce income for the empire. He sees them as the dedicated, gifted artists of their trade that they are. He sees them as fully human and approaches them with an offer to turn onto a path they've heard about but never experienced in the ways they are surely about to experience.

Third: He invites people to experience that alternative through the preaching, teaching, and healing he and his disciples will offer. He will need his disciples' skills of casting and mending as they partner with him to create this new way of walking. They will go out and find the needs, bring people to Jesus, work with him to heal and restore, and then send people out again. The work will have a rhythm, and they will be in sync, working side-by-side without much explanation. Together, the news will spread that there is a different way of being in the world, and the hope of that good news will spread like a shining light in the midnight dark.

But it won't be long before people forget again. They will forget how it felt to be newly on the path of God. They will forget what the pulsing, moving, breathing presence of God is like. They will forget the call to pivot and turn onto a different way. They will forget that the call of Jesus was a call to a love so distinct and so life-giving that it threatened the empire of his day. And they will make new paths and argue about which one is best and truest and right. And this process of forgetting and wandering doesn't

take very long because Paul writes to the church at Corinth calling them back to the path again.

"I hear from Chloe's people that you are arguing among yourselves," he chides. There's division in the church, and folks have gone to Paul with their gossip to rat out the ones who are fighting. In verse 10 he writes, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

The same tendency we have to put our faith in the rulers and powers of this world happens in other communities as well. And here we read of divisions between the best teachers or truest teachers. Paul's call for unity is not a call to agree on all things in all times. I want for us to hear that clearly. This does not mean the church at Corinth or the church at St. Charles must be without disagreement or unified on all points.

The call for agreement and unity is to be singularly aligned in the call to follow the Way of Christ. The reason we are gathering is the way of Jesus. The reason we show up here week after week is to listen for the invitation to pivot, turn our steps, return to the Jesus path, and reprioritize our lives around the teachings and example of Christ. We must be in agreement about this. We must be of the same mind and same purpose or else we will be heading off in a dozen directions with various motivations for the path we're taking.

Is our goal to be an elegant country club for the beautiful and the well-heeled? Is our goal to be an academic discussion group where big thoughts and big words are discussed merely for their own sake? Is our goal to be a civic-minded service club where we gather to do good and feel good about our doing good? What are we giving our lives to here in this place? Paul is calling the church at Corinth and the church at St. Charles back onto the path of Jesus, and that path is a way of revolutionary love with constant work of casting and mending to be done. That path invites us to be partners in a work we can't always see and a way we must intuitively follow together; diligently doing the work of God's kingdom, side-by-side.

People of the church, be of the same mind and the same purpose. Know your mission. Share your vision. The way of the church is not the way of the world's powerful. Take comfort in that my friends. We are about a kingdom that is separate and distinct from the kingdoms we know so well. The way of the church, as hard as it may sometimes be for us pastors to admit, is also not the way of Elizabeth Lott or of Don Frampton or of Sarah Shelton or even of that beloved Pastor Dick Randels. The way of the church, the mission that unites us as a people, the guiding way of our life together, the way of your

specific and unique calling as the person you were shaped to be is wrapped up singularly in the life, teachings, and continued light of Christ Jesus. And to us who are being saved, the message of Jesus is the very power of God. On this, we must agree. To this, we give our lives. For this, we join the revolution of God's promise and God's love as seen so fully in the life of Christ, working and sharing this life together, side-by-side. May it be so here. Amen.