

January 27, 2008: Epiphany 3A

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Matthew 4:12-23

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the 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.” ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

¹⁸As 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 sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and **proclaiming the good news of the**

kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Isaiah 9:1-4

There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time God brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time God will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest... ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

¹⁴Wait for God; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for God!

Let us pray.....

The past two weeks we have moved from Jesus' baptism by John to his vision quest in the wilderness and now this week we hear of the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the calling of the first disciples.

Jesus has finished a forty day fast in the wilderness in which he is tempted to deny his baptismal commitment to the kin-dom of God and serve the idols of wealth and power. Jesus resists the temptation and returns from his spiritual vision quest prepared to take on the ministry to which God has called him.

How does Matthew set the stage? What is the context in which Jesus begins his public ministry?

John has been arrested and imprisoned. The empire and its local collaborators have launched campaign of repression and terror against the Kin-dom of God movement. Jesus, believing himself to be in imminent danger withdraws to Galilee from Judea, where John's organization was centered. And Jesus does not return to his home town of Nazareth, but rather, he sets up his home, his first base of operation in Capernaum a town in which he is not well known by the imperial authorities and where the authorities in Jerusalem that control Judea have no jurisdiction.

We are still in the opening chapters of Matthew. We are at the beginning of the story and this is the third time that Jesus has had to escape a death threat from the empire.

This is the third time Jesus has become a displaced person, a refugee, a migrant.

First Jesus parents had to flee the infanticide as the occupational forces slaughtered the children of Bethlehem. But even after the death of those who committed the massacre of Bethlehem, the authorities in Judea were so repressive that Jesus parents could not return to their home but had to make a new home in village of Nazareth in the Galilee.

Jesus went from Galilee to Judea to become of part of the Kin-dom of God movement led by John and in our text this morning he is displaced yet again into the Galilee, but cannot return to his home in Nazareth but migrates to Capernaum.

The scene that Matthew sets before us is painfully familiar. More of the human family are displaced persons, refugees, migrants that in another time in history. Innocent people fleeing their homes to escape the terror of violent and war, the deadly poverty of global capitalism and environmental destruction. 4 million Iraqis displaced by the US war. Over 4 million killed in Congo. More millions killed and displaced in Somalia. More millions killed and displaced in Colombia. 1000's forced to abandon their homes every day throughout Central America and Mexico as imperial free trade policies destroy their economies.

Jesus is in their company.

Jesus is in their company. Amen? Amen!

Despite all this forced displacement and suffering of Jesus and his family, Jesus takes up the mantle of his teacher and colleague John. Yes, Jesus “withdraws from Judea”, he moves to a safer location. But he does NOT flee, run and hide and abandon his baptismal commitment. **If John can no longer proclaim Good News to the poor and organize communities of resistance and hope then Jesus will.**

This is also the Third time that Matthew has quoted from the Prophet Isaiah. Just as Isaiah proclaimed God’s promise that the people would be liberated from the imperial system of domination of his time, so to Jesus will be God’s agent to liberate the people from the imperial oppression of his day. Just as God broke yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor on the day of Midian so does God accompany all the poor and oppressed in their struggle for liberation.

Matthew has Jesus begin his ministry proclaiming exactly what John did, “Repent, for the Kin-dom of God is here.”
Repent, for the Kin-dom of God is here!

In Hebrew the word Repentance literally means to turn around, to change direction or trajectory.

Turn around, change direction, change your trajectory, for the kin-dom of God is here!

Turn away from the systems of domination that enslave and oppress us as individuals, as communities, as the human family. Turn away from the way of death that is killing us and our planet!

Turn towards the way of Life! Turn to the way to God! Turn to the Way of wholeness! Turn to the way of welcome and belonging. Turn to the Kin-dom of God that is even now being birthed!

The four folks that first respond to Jesus invitation to turn their lives around and join Jesus in proclaiming the Good News to the Poor and building communities of resistance that struggle to embody the values of the Kin-dom of God are workers. They are workers in the fishing industry that has been restructured to serve the interests of the imperial economy and has destroyed the traditional local village economy.

And throughout the Galilee, the people respond to Jesus message and witness that an alternative way is possible. People experience new life, healing, wholeness, hope. And the word spreads throughout the land, change is possible, another world is possible!

Today, we as a community who struggle turn away from the ways of death and follow the Way of Jesus, are going to decide if we turn again and follow a Jesus who is found in the midst of the millions of displaced persons, refugees and migrants of our world. We will decide whether or not to publicly join the New Sanctuary movement and

recommit ourselves to standing in solidarity with our undocumented sisters and brothers. Will we welcome the strangers in our midst as Jesus has welcomed us?

We are also commissioning those who have been called to provide leadership to our community for the next year. With gratitude we ask God to bless them and guide them for they have said "Yes." Yes, to being servant leaders in our community so that we might turn yet again, to turn more deeply, more completely so that we more fully incarnate the values of the Kin-dom of God.

How wonderful and right it is that we take these two important actions today as we prepare to enter our Lenten journey.

Just as we, as a community are deciding if we will reaffirm our walk with Jesus who is found in the midst of the displaced and undocumented, and just as our Leadership team has said Yes to their call to servant leadership, so each of us, during Lent, is invited to reflect deeply and honestly on what are the next turnings that are required of us on our journey of discipleship?

What are the next turning that are required of us as we work toward a life of greater commitment, simplicity and joy?

What are the next turnings that are required of each of us so that our lives proclaim the Good News to the poor that the Kin-dom of God is here?

Sisters and brothers, let us risk facing what the future requires of us with courage and joy. For if God is our light, then who shall we fear? With the Psalmist I declare that we shall see the goodness of God in the land of the living. With the Matthean community of the followers of Jesus I declare that the Kin-dom of God is here among us even now.

Amen