

Matthew 4:12-23

Today's Gospel reading situates us right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In the passages immediately preceding this one, Jesus has been baptized, driven into the desert, and resisted the temptations of the devil. And now, he has withdrawn to the quiet Galilean town of Capernaum, the place that will become sort of homebase for him. It's from Capernaum that Jesus will begin his ministry all throughout the Galilean region. Jesus shares a simple enough message as he begins this ministry, a very straightforward sermon to preach, and thankfully, Matthew is kind enough to record for us in today's Gospel reading: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

In the person of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is indeed coming near. The phrase in Greek gives the connotation of an continuous state, a sort of permanence to the state of the kingdom's arrival. It is active. It is ongoing. And it is here now, Jesus will tell his listeners.

Fortunately for us, Jesus also shares the correct response as we witness the kingdom of God drawing near: Jesus calls us to repent. To our modern ears, the word repent typically suggests feelings of remorse, sorrow, regret, or guilt. But the root of the word repent more closely implies an action. To repent means to turn around, to backtrack, to amend one's life by taking the necessary steps to change our actions for the future. Repentance isn't really a feeling at all, but an action – a movement to reorient ourselves and our lives more toward God and God's desires. It is a movement that decenters the self, away from our own goals and wants, even and especially when our wants and desires run against those of God.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near, Jesus tells those first century Galileans. But it is a message that is meant for our ears, too, just the same as it was meant for

those first listeners. God's kingdom is drawing close, pulling us in even now. And in response, we turn ourselves toward that kingdom and away from the kingdoms of the earth, allowing ourselves to be pulled into whatever it is God sets before us.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Our Gospel reading doesn't just tell us about the proper response to God's drawing near, it *shows* us a perfect example of repentance in the story of Jesus calling his first few followers. As Jesus walks along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he sees two pairs of brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, followed later by the brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee. All of them are fisherman, plying their trade on the sea when Jesus draws near to them, calls out to them, and invites them into his new, strange, and fantastic ministry.

Our Gospel reading uses the same word twice to describe the speed with which both sets of brothers react. They *immediately* leave what they are doing and follow Jesus. It is important not to let ourselves minimize the actions of these sets of brothers. With barely a word from Jesus, they immediately leave their jobs, their livelihoods, their supplies, even their own families in response to Jesus' invitation to follow. It is almost comical, borderline nonsensical how quickly they leave it all behind, seemingly abandoning their boats and nets right there on the shore to take up a life as disciples of Christ. One commentary I read this week called it the first miracle in Matthew's Gospel, the fact that just a simple invitation from Jesus is compelling enough for these brothers to drop everything and follow Jesus into the unknown ministry ahead.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Like those brothers on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus calls to us, too. The kingdom of heaven still draws near. We, too, are being called to respond to God's kingdom as it is still approaching, still unfolding in the world around us. We,

too, are called to turn our lives towards God, to reorder, reset, and allow ourselves to rethink what life can and should look like in response to Jesus' drawing near and his invitation to become followers.

One of the things I love about this call story of these four men, these first few disciples of Christ, is how Jesus takes that gifts that these brothers already naturally possess and invites them to reimagine how they could be used differently, less for the kingdoms of the earth, and more for the inbreaking kingdom of heaven. These men are fishermen. There's a really good chance that people in their families had been fishermen for generations, years and years of learning this craft, perfecting this trade, passed from one generation to the next. In calling them into ministry with him, Jesus does not ask James and John and Andrew and Peter to abandon their skills, their gifts, their knowledge but to think seriously about how they are using them, especially now that the dawning kingdom of heaven has been revealed to them. To Andrew and Peter, Jesus offers to make them fishers of people. Come with me, he says, and see how God can use your gifts and talents in new, exciting, and meaningful ways. They have the faith and courage to say yes.

In our own lives, Jesus tells us much the same. God has given you and me, all of us, unique gifts, talents, resources, and things we enjoy doing, things that we've spent years learning and perfecting and things we're just naturally gifted at. The question posed to us in a Gospel like this one is how are we use those gifts and talents. In light of God's continuously unfolding kingdom, how are we being called to use the gifts we have been given to build up God's kingdom here on earth?

Today's reading hints at what Matthew's Gospel will spend much time showing as we go along, that the kingdom of heaven is so very different from the kingdoms of earth. Turn for turn,

throughout his Gospel, Matthew will show Jesus meeting hatred with love, darkness with light, anger and fear with joy and peace. In the end, the kingdom of heaven will be about connection, love, empathy, mercy, and justice. Jesus will again and again refuse to meet cruelty with more cruelty, hatred with more hatred, fear with more fear. Jesus will willingly choose to die for our sake, for the sins of this broken, hurting, imperfect world rather than meet violence with more violence. In the end, Jesus will break the cycles of evil and sin that continue to hold the human family hostage, and in our lives, Jesus will invite us to do the same.

This is the kind of kingdom into which we are called to service, the kind of kingdom Jesus tells us is coming near and unfolding in the world. This is the kind of kingdom God is building up here on earth, the kind of kingdom God has promised to bring into being at the end of time. Jesus not only calls us to hold onto that promise, to keep faith and hope alive. Jesus also invites us to become partners in that work. It's almost too wonderful to imagine, the invitation we receive from God to become partners in God's ongoing plan to restore, renew, heal, and redeem. What grace and blessing it is that we are given gifts in the first place, that God gives us skills and traits and talents that bring us joy. But it is even greater grace that God then gives us a calling, a purpose, a holy and divine mission in which we to use those gifts to continue building up the kingdom of heaven that is very much drawing near.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near, Jesus preached in Capernaum so long ago. Just as the kingdom of heaven is ongoing, so is the invitation to repent, to turn toward God and away from the self, to reimagine how we can use our gifts and talents to build that kingdom and benefit our brothers and sisters around us.