

Bringing Light to Those Whose Lives are Dark

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Matthew 4: 12-23

There must have been something attractive about it. When Jesus called and Simon and Andrew and James and John left their nets and their boats there on the shore and went with him, there must have been something attractive about it, something that felt like a better life. We tend to romanticize fishing. Certainly, we romanticize the kind that we do for recreation and sport. I mean, it's a change, you're outdoors usually in a beautiful spot, and you let all your stress and cares go.

But, to understand this text, we'd probably do a lot better to talk to some of the men who commercially fish out on the Eastern Shore. We should talk to them about the hours they work and the back-breaking labor of it. We should talk to them about the fluctuations in the market price for fish, and who makes the real money in that exchange. When Charlette and I were on our honeymoon on Curacao down in the Caribbean, from our little bungalow, every morning and every evening we watched the men in their wooden fishing boats head out and come back in with their catch. Even from a distance of a hundred yards, you could tell that their skin was tough and like shoe leather. No matter what we might like to think, it can't be an easy or idyllic life.

As Matthew has it, Jesus calls disciples to be part of bringing light to those whose lives somehow feel like sitting in darkness. But, I get the feeling that even his calling of these commercial fishermen felt like light to them in their darkness. I get the feeling there was something attractive about it. Well, when Jesus hears that John the Baptist has been arrested, he throws down the gauntlet! We might get the wrong idea from the way some of the language sounds to us. Matthew saying that at that point, Jesus "withdrew to Galilee." We might think well, he didn't want to confront the powers that be there in Jerusalem and Judea just yet, so he went to Galilee. He withdrew...kind of a strategic retreat.

But, as Matthew has it, I don't think that's it at all. I think what he really does is take John the Baptist's message and expand it further in every way! As Matthew tells it, Jesus in his preaching takes John the Baptist's sermon word for word. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." But, Jesus says in effect, it's not enough to speak that message of hope to turn from living out of fear, because God's Kingdom is near...it's not enough to speak that just to the folks in Judea, because even if some of them were sinners and outcasts, they were still all Jews. Jesus goes to "Galilee of the Gentiles," says Matthew, quoting from Isaiah. Because their lives feel like darkness, too. And their darkness is not that they don't know the right doctrine. Their darkness is the same darkness that the Jews in Judea were in.

They had misnamed who God really is. They didn't really comprehend a God of the universe who is pure grace, and so the darkness that is just part of life stayed dark. Matthew, because of his experience of Christ has come to know how to read that scripture from Isaiah. Isaiah describes this long winter without light. It was 732 BC in the northern kingdom of Israel in the land of Zebulun, later to be called Galilee. And the people watched in fear as the enemy armies of Tiglath-Pileser came to all their towns to oppress and enslave them. They watched as they became exiles and hostages in their own homes. It would have been kind of like what happened when first the Russians and then the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan. It was a dark and very fearful day.

So, says Matthew, it's that, that Jesus had in mind, knowing that God's word of hope is meant for all whose lives feel like darkness, knowing that all our darkness is finally the same darkness. He throws down the gauntlet and takes this message of hope and the love of God to cast out fear to "Galilee of the Gentiles." That's the thing with Jesus, isn't it? There is no "us

and them.” Either we're all “us”, because we're all “them,” or instead we make Jesus “them”. We make Jesus the enemy, which of course in the crucifixion, is what we did. But, *with* Jesus, there is no “us and them.” The darkness that covers our lives from time to time is the same darkness that covers everyone's life from time to time. It is the darkness of guilt, of regret, of resentment and anger. It is the darkness of broken relations. It is the darkness of fear and anxiety, and sometimes the darkness of self-indulgence. It is the darkness of sadness and despair. It is the darkness of grief and loss. It is the darkness of addiction that masquerades as something life-giving. It is the darkness of boredom. And, what happens in the midst of this darkness when people lose hope? The darkness stays dark.

But listen. This is the gospel. In Jesus message to repent, to turn from fearful living and fearful thinking is the dawning of great light, says Matthew. “The 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.” And furthermore, Jesus calls disciples to be part of bringing that light! He finds these four fishermen hard at their work on the sea and he says to them: you fisher-men, follow me, and I will make you fish for men; you fisher-people, follow me, and I will make you fish for people!” And if we want to continue with the fishing metaphor in the context of Matthew it's this: follow me and I will make you those who bring up people out of the depths of the darkness of the sea, into the light of day.

He calls disciples to be part of bringing the light that is the news and power of God's love and grace for all who sit in darkness. And that is all of us, isn't it? Friends, that's what we're called to, in Jesus. And it is a call to work, to a way of living in relation to others. As Samuel Chandler has said, this story says that to follow Jesus is to fish, not simply to be caught passively in a net ourselves.” It's to *fish*. To follow Jesus is to be part of *bringing* light to all whose lives are feeling like darkness, to name that darkness and to declare the hope that is God's love of them, in the face of it. And here's the thing: it's not nearly so hard as you think it is. It's no accident that when calling fishermen, Jesus speaks in terms of fishing.

It's not that fishing was the best metaphor to use for the life of faith and discipleship. It's that fishing is the metaphor that fishermen best understand. That is, when calling us, when giving us our mission for him, Jesus doesn't start with what *he* knows. He starts with what *we* know. If he'd been speaking to seamstresses, he would have said, “follow me, and I'll make you sew the world with love.” If he'd been speaking to teachers, he would have said, “follow me, and I'll make you teachers of grace.” If he'd been speaking to farmers, he would have said, “follow me, and I will make you planters of seeds of love and hope, and growers of souls.” If he'd been speaking to parents and children and siblings and neighbors, he would have said, “follow me, and I will make you all of these things to every other human being.”

Friends, there are as many ways to be part of Christ's light, to help dispel the darkness of peoples' lives as there are people. He starts with what *you* know. Let his light shine in and through you. You know how to do this, you simply take the gifts and the knowledge and the discipline that you already have for doing what it is you do and you put them to work to help bring a word of hope, to help dispel the darkness that those around you are experiencing. This is the gospel You do not need to live in or live out of fear. God's grace is sufficient. There is light for your darkness whatever it is. And you have the gifts to be part of the light for others.

Amen.