

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.

We are currently in the church season of Epiphany which will come to an end later next month with Matthew’s account of Jesus’ transfiguration. Epiphany is the season that celebrates God’s manifestation to the world through the person of Jesus.

The gospel according to Matthew opens with a genealogy tracing Jesus, Messiah, back to Abraham. Then Matthew adds his version of Jesus’ birth story; Matthew claims Jesus’ birth to be the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah’s words: “*Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,*” which means, “*God is with us.*”

Matthew then tells the story – the gospel’s good news – of God’s manifestation, through Jesus’ teaching, preaching, and healing. To close this story the very last line of Matthew’s gospel is: “And remember, ***I am with you always***, to the end of the age.” From beginning to end, Matthew proclaims that God is indeed with us...always!

Today’s lesson introduces another Gospel truth that runs from the beginning to the end of Matthew’s gospel as well. John the Baptist proclaims it first: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Following John’s arrest, Jesus began his ministry with the

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

So Jesus went out...teaching...proclaiming the good news...and curing every disease. As Matthew recounts in chapter 10, Jesus also sent his disciples out to do the very same thing: “...go,” Jesus said to them, “proclaim the good news...cure the sick...” (Mt. 10:7-8). And what was that good news exactly? Matthew records Jesus saying, “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’” ***The kingdom of heaven has come near.*** That’s the good news they were to proclaim.

And what will be a sign that the kingdom of heaven is drawing near? In the “great commission,” again at the end of Matthew’s gospel, making disciples and baptizing them will be a sign that the realm of God has come near. Jesus commissions his followers, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*” As people are invited into discipleship, as people are baptized into discipleship, the kingdom of heaven draws near.

Our passage today is akin to a summary of Matthew’s entire gospel: Using imagery from the Old Testament, Matthew shows how ancient scripture pointed to Jesus as the promised Messiah. In Jesus’ time, John the Baptist pointed to Jesus to announce that the kingdom of heaven had come near. Jesus proclaimed the same to his disciples, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” And again, Jesus commissioned his disciples to pass on this good news; the realm of God is dawning in our midst.

The story of this good news continues to fan out across the world, spreading light to fill the shadows of darkness, death, and despair. As baptized believers, we now take up the mantle of the good news, we are now light bearers proclaiming that God is with us; the kingdom of heaven is breaking in, right here, right now! And as I suggested last week, our proclamation is not necessarily spoken. As baptized believers the kingdom of heaven is revealed in our lives of faith; in our lives of discipleship. This is especially true with children, for they learn far more from what they see, than from what they hear.

Let us be clear that this in-breaking kingdom of heaven is not some old story confined to ancient times. If our God is a living God; if our God continues to make all things new; if our God is still speaking, then the kingdom *is* coming near, and breaking into our time and space with every act of love, compassion, and self-sacrifice.

God draws near and becomes known in acts of love; God draws near and becomes known in acts of compassion, God draws near and becomes known in acts of self-sacrifice. This points unmistakably to the reality that the place we most clearly see the kingdom of heaven breaking in, is in our relationships with one another!

“I will make you fishers of people,” Jesus said. The call of discipleship is a call to be in relationship with others; to be fishers of people.

Now some of you may be thinking, ‘hang on, pastor, I have a day job, I can’t drop everything do this discipleship thing!’ ‘And frankly, fishing for people sounds just a little too weird.’

Our call to be a disciple is not the same thing as a job, or what we do to earn a living. Our call to be a disciple is our call to be the person God desires us to be. Discipleship is about being in relationship with the God who is always with us, who calls us in Christ to be in relationship, and connected to, the world around us. Our call to discipleship is a call to participate in the vision, the hope, and the new life of the in-breaking realm of God. It’s about relationship.

In my last year in high school I got a job in a local super market. I worked in the meat department. I wore a white coat and an apron and was responsible for the refrigerated dairy and prepackaged meats and cheeses. Occasionally I would work the deli, slicing and weighing customer orders.

I liked working at the super market, but not because of the work. It was the people I worked with that kept me coming back.

There was a new hire that came into the meat department. He was my age, but we didn’t get along. I guess it began to show and get in the way of the operation of the department. Our manager, Louie, called us both to a meeting...in the cooler. He laid it out straight and simple; we either figured out how to get along with each other, or

one of us would go. I had great respect for Louie, and the two of us did learn to get along and work well together.

Working in the meat department of a supermarket wasn’t my calling. But I learned valuable lessons there about relationships. Relationships are formative and nurturing. Relationships teach us many things, and I am the person I am today because of all the relationships which have blessed my life.

Just think of all the people whose lives have intersected with yours throughout your life! Parents, siblings, neighbors, teachers, colleagues, supervisors, friends near and far, store clerks, doctors, nurses, counselors, first responders, government officials, and the list goes on and on and on...

If we think back on our relationships we might see – in hindsight – how the presence of God had broken in; how the kingdom of heaven had come near. When we feel blessed, is that not the realm of God drawing near? When a friend comes, without being asked, to help us, does that not feel like the kingdom of heaven has come near. When we feel like we’ve just experienced a moment of grace after a near miss with calamity, is that not the kingdom come near?

If we’ve experienced the kingdom coming near, then we can be the bearers of this grace for others. God is with us. God seeks to be known in us. God seeks to move through us with good news for others. The legacy of discipleship has been handed down to us. The call to discipleship is a call to be in relationship with our sisters and brothers. We cannot pass on the grace of God if we are not nurturing our existing relationships and seeking to create new ones.

I’ll close now by stealing David Lose’s summery on discipleship: *Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to be in relationship with the ordinary people all around them, and through that did extraordinary things...and still does.*

The kingdom of heaven has indeed drawn near to us. We live in this grace. Isn’t it amazing! May God’s peace be always with you. Amen.