

January 22, 2017
The Rev. Erin Hensley
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Matthew 4:12-23

God is Faithful

When I attended a weekend introduction to the Christian life by teens for teens in ninth grade, I learned the phrase: “Make a friend. Be a friend. Bring a friend to Christ.” I found myself surrounded by God’s wondrous love. Through the incarnate community gathered that weekend and all of the stories of Jesus, the Word, I had heard in worship for years, God intruded into my ordinary high school life. I consciously encountered Jesus myself for the first time. I could do nothing but look to this Son of God, Son of Man, and follow his way even though I had and still have little idea of where I am going.

Jesus’ baptism was his ordination to ministry, which is the same for you and me. After being tempted in the wilderness and wrestling with the evil of ego, Jesus’ public ministry began. In Jesus’ life, not just his death, resurrection, and ascension, a new kingdom has dawned, the very rule of God has been inaugurated and sworn in for all time, for all people, for all of creation. In our account from the Gospel according to Matthew today, Jesus’ public ministry begins with preaching: “Repent for the kingdom of God has come near. Change your mind. Get yourself a new orientation for the way you live, then act on it. The rule of God has now begun on earth as it is in heaven.”¹ In the midst of this powerful proclamation shared where division and destruction appears to have won,² Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee. He commands fisherman Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, in the midst of their day jobs of fishing to follow and then makes a promise “I will transform your life. You will bring in God’s business.”

As far as we know from the text, they have not heard Jesus preach or teach. They could ask, “What are you talking about? How do you fish for people? Where are you going? What’s the job worth? With whom have you been in business like this?” And yet, they don’t ask a thing. After Jesus commanded them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people,” immediately Simon Peter and Andrew left their nets and followed. Immediately James and John left the boat and their father in that boat, and followed Jesus.

Such a command from Jesus seems incredibly hard to follow and the disciples’ response seems equally extreme. When we’re privileged with loving, safe families, we can’t imagine leaving them at all, much less without saying goodbye. Of course, the idea of following without an itinerary, a contract, checked out references seems downright foolish. And certainly God couldn’t expect this much sacrifice from every disciple—otherwise, we would all be monks and nuns, right?

In contemplating what we would do, we forget some things. We forget that they may not have thought they would be leaving their families forever. They may have thought they were going on a day trip. We forget what it’s like to for our hearts to raise their hands without thing, what it’s like to compelled and curious beyond rational thought.

¹ “Get yourself a new orientation for the way you live, then act on it” on what it means to repent in this passage, from *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* on Matthew’s Gospel p.167

² Thousands of years earlier, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were ruled by empire and the Roman Empire has its boot on those same lands during Jesus’ time.

And then, of course, we know the end of the story; the first disciples didn't know. We know that Jesus like John the Baptist will be delivered up. Jesus will be crucified by the state for his proclamation in word and deed of the Kingdom of God. The same God who raised Israel will raise him up.³

The response of Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John is what happens when God made manifest commands and calls us. Their following is not a result of super human powers, self-will, or special worthy. Jesus finds them in the world. The initiative in discipleship is God's. The sweet baby Jesus, the Christ child has grown up, has increased in grace and favor and the same Word who spoke creation into being is the same Word who is now living and walking and proclaiming and commanding in the land of Naphtali and Zebulon speaking a new creation into being. The incarnate Word of God generates the very worldwide restoration business of God.

As strange and mixed up as things are right now, this is not the last Word in our life. The last word is the first word in God's kingdom-Jesus, God incarnate. We do not have to initiate a thing. We do not have to prove ourselves to Jesus. We do not have to enjoy what he commands us to do. We do not have to take Jesus out into the world. We do not have to save the world. The Savior has come and it's not us or anybody else. The savior of nations has come, lived, died, risen, and will come again. God is faithful. Working with God, yoking ourselves in such work is easy because the initiative has been taken; the victory is God's; love has won.⁴

The trusting, the walking by faith and not by sight is what is hard. In *Hands of Light* Barbara Brennen says it this way "Faith means carrying on with your truth when all the outer signs that come to you tell that it couldn't possibly be true, but deep inside, you know it is. This does not mean blind belief. It means to keep aligned with your intent to become aware of and follow as best you can, even though you feel terrible."⁵

As Episcopal sociologist Brené Brown might say, going all in, showing up, being seen, living wholeheartedly is incredibly vulnerable, especially when we've armored up our hearts and minds for a long time. Taking one step to become more conscious of and in tune with God's truth and love in the midst of tough feelings-this is faith.

Consider Jesus the Christ on the cross. He had the faith to name his feeling of betrayal and loneliness when he cried out in the words of the Psalter, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Jesus did not pretend that he still felt faith or "try to make that feeling into something it truly wasn't." Brennan goes on to write, "He loved himself by honestly expressing his dilemma. Later, he regained his faith when he stated, Father into your hands I commit my soul."

When we engage the truth of our life, we are faithful. This is the grace of the Lord who intrudes in our daily life and work, who makes our response possible, who empowers our proclamation. Christ brings himself to us. We befriend our truth. We make

³ American theologian Robert Jenson says that "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt," which Stanley Hauerwas argues is the way to write a theological sentence. He shared this sentence from Jenson in his address to clergy at the Episcopal Diocese of Texas' clergy conference in 2015 as well as in an address to students at Wycliffe (<http://www.anglicanjournal.com/articles/stanley-hauerwas-tells-wycliffe-college-how-to-write-a-good-sentence>)

⁴ Matthew 11:30 "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"

⁵ B. Brennen *Hands of Light* in "The Development of a Healer" page 277

our journey together always with God's help, always with God's proclamation that the kingdom has come near and God's promise that we shall all be changed. Jesus' word in our lives creates faith; may we have the courage to keep it.⁶ *Amen.*

⁶ Presiding Bishop Curry's hallmark line at the end of his addresses and sermons "Keep the faith." I thank God for this message, which is so needed for our times.