

## 1-25-26 Sermon: “Fishing for People” – Matthew 4:12-23

Friends, I have to tell you: yesterday afternoon, I finished my sermon, closed my computer, and then picked up my phone to see the news that ICE had shot and killed another protestor on the streets of Minneapolis – VA ICU nurse Alex Pretti.

After the initial shock, horror, and nausea wore off, all I could think was, “I don’t know how to do this.” I don’t know how to live through these times. I don’t know how to get up here, week after week, and preach the gospel – literally the “good news” – when the news we keep getting is bad and worse. I don’t know how to proclaim the sovereignty of a loving God when evil feels like it’s winning the day.

I can only hope that maybe there’s something to grab onto in this morning’s Gospel reading, because it starts with Jesus getting some bad news. Jesus hears that John the Baptist – his friend (maybe cousin?), his co-conspirator, the man who just baptized him, has been arrested by King Herod.

We learn more about what happened later in Matthew’s Gospel; it’s a tale as old as time. John criticized Herod, and Herod, the insecure tyrant, didn’t like it, so he threw John in jail. Later in the story, he will have John executed.

When Jesus hears that John has been arrested, he withdraws to a town called Capernaum. We can hardly blame Jesus for wanting to withdraw – to get out of the spotlight and off Herod’s radar before he gets arrested – or worse – himself.

That would make sense, but apparently it is *not* what Jesus is doing. Because the very first thing he does when he gets to Capernaum is to take up John’s message as his own. Jesus goes around preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” the exact same message that John was preaching when he got in trouble.

Then Jesus calls four disciples to his cause – Andrew, Peter, James, and John – and starts his public tour of Galilee – preaching, teaching, and healing people from every kind of disease.

So much for keeping a low profile...

So, if Jesus is not trying to stay out of the limelight – and he’s clearly not – why *does* he withdraw when he hears about John’s arrest? And why does Matthew feel the need to tell us about it? Jesus is starting a new ministry, picking up where John left off, and it makes more sense for him to seize the moment – jump right in, fill the vacuum John left behind. Instead, the first thing Jesus does is draw back and step away for a moment.

Perhaps we can understand where Jesus is coming from. When horrible things keep happening on repeat, sometimes we need to withdraw for a moment. Sometimes we need to step away, to give ourselves space to rest and recuperate, to be in the presence of God and remember that there is good in this world alongside the evil.

Our need for this kind of periodic withdrawal is both spiritual and psychological. Our bodies are not wired to handle the constant stream of trauma that comes from scrolling on social media or just reading constant bad news. And if we stay in the bad-news-and-trauma cycle too long, our bodies respond with a kind of secondary-PTSD; often it’s called compassion fatigue. We become paralyzed, burnt-out, no good for the work ahead if we don’t let our hearts, minds, and souls take a rest.

Which is to say that if you find yourself feeling this kind of spiritual exhaustion and empathy overload right now, remember this: Jesus withdrew, from time to time in his ministry, to take care of himself. And you can do the same – no matter what your friends, family, or action alerts are telling you. Sometimes we have to first step back in order to move forward.

Jesus withdraws to the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Matthew tells us that this is a place associated with dark times; he quotes Isaiah – “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

This is Matthew’s style; he loves to take Old Testament Scripture and apply it to the story of Jesus. But while he’s doing this, Matthew also points to a profound theological truth. Jesus often comes to us in our places of deepest darkness. In theory, God could meet us anywhere on our journey, but more often than not, Christ comes to us in the darkness, right in the middle of bad news.

Maybe this is when we need God most, so we’re more inclined to recognize God’s presence. Or maybe it’s this whole idea of the cross, of a Savior who comes to suffer *with us*, who chooses to identify himself with “the least of these.” But whatever the reason, it seems like every time I find myself in the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus is there, too. Which makes me think he *must* be with us now, we who are so weary of receiving bad news.

When Jesus is done with his time of withdrawing, he begins to preach. And then Jesus calls his first disciples.

It’s interesting...I’ve heard this story a hundred times, but something new stood out to me this week. Jesus is the one who brings salvation, but he does not call his disciples to save the world. He calls them – calls us – to build the community. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

This is intriguing to me. When there’s a world in need of saving, fishing for people does not seem like the most urgent task at hand. Why not set things right first and *then* focus on making sure everyone has a seat at the table?

Maybe some of this reluctance comes from the fact that saving the world seems cleaner, more straightforward, than building a community. Communities are hard work because communities are made of *people!* Real people, with their sounds, and smells, and feelings, and opinions, and doubts, and imperfections...

Communities can be quite the liability. The disciples all managed to get in Jesus’ way at *some* point in his ministry, and we too can get off track, can get the message wrong. So why on earth does Jesus keep calling us to fish for people? Why does he direct our focus to the community instead of the task at hand?

Perhaps it is because we need the full diversity of God’s gathered people. If the world is to be saved, we will need people with different gifts and skills and perspectives. People who see things differently than we do, who can propose another way to move forward when my way leads to a dead end.

Perhaps Jesus calls us to fish for people because our confession is that we, *the church*, are the Body of Christ, not we as individuals. Which means that if Christ is indeed present in this dark time on earth it’s not in me or in you, it’s in all of us together – Christ’s one gathered body. And if that Body is not complete, then God’s will cannot be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Friends, I don’t know how to live through these times. I’m grasping at straws, just like you. But my faith teaches me to look to Jesus, and when I do, I see glimpses of what the next right things for us might be:

Allow ourselves to withdraw, when the weight of evil in the world is too much to bear.

Go to the places where it is dark, for it is there that we will meet God.

Build the Beloved Community – grow that circle wider and wider, until there’s room for everyone inside it.

The world needs, desperately, to be saved. But I am not a Savior, I don't know how to do that. What I am – and what you are – is a disciple. And disciples build community. We show up for one another. And in deepest darkness, we bear witness to the light.

Amen.