

Sermon – January 22, 2023  
“For the kingdom of God has come near”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 4:12-23

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit and fill our open hearts and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that continues transforming us into Christ's image and leading us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen*

Good morning! I hope that Jesus has richly blessed our week and that we have been given abundant opportunities to work in Jesus' mission this past week. Let me encourage us to read our Bibles in this new year, committing to read the entire Bible in 2023. Seek to find time or times each day to read God's word and to talk with God about what you are reading. Take the challenge this year to read more of the word of God and to share what we are reading with each other. The Good News Club at Northumberland Elementary School begins Wednesday of this week. Help is always appreciated. Talk with Judy Mooers if you are interested in helping, but if you would commit to be in prayer during the club from 3:00 – 4:30 p.m. on Wednesdays, asking Jesus to bless those working and to stir the hearts of his children to hear the Good News, it would be a great blessing for the club. Give that some thought and if you can, during the time we are working with children, lift up the club in prayer, asking Jesus to be present and at work through and with those at Good News Club.

Matthew begins this morning's scripture reading letting us know that news has come to Jesus that John the Baptist has been arrested, and in response to this news, Jesus moves to Capernaum, a large city on the Sea of Galilee estimated to have a population of about 10,000 people in the first century. As we think about why Jesus makes this move, we may find

ourselves postulating that he moves in response to Herod acting against John the Baptist and his concern that Herod will also act against him. We do know that Herod was concerned about the large numbers of people going out to be baptized in the wilderness by John and that Herod also took issue with John's insistence that he should not have married his brother's wife. However, if we take a quick look at the location of Capernaum, we will find Jesus' new headquarters is just 8.5 miles from Herod's capital of Tiberius, another large city on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' new home for ministry is very close to Herod. Jesus has left Nazareth because, as he shared with the people of Nazareth, he will be including Gentiles in his ministry, and the people of Nazareth tried to kill him in response to his plan. Jesus is on the move and his move has been into the northern part of Israel, the area of Galilee where Gentile neighbors live on three sides of the Jews living in the area. It is a place far from the eyes of the religious leaders in Jerusalem and a place considered to be the religious backwaters of Israel.

Matthew, who is quick to point out to his readers where Jesus' actions fulfill Old Testament prophecies, also points out that Jesus's move to Capernaum brings him into the land of Naphtali and Zebulun, two of the twelve tribes of Israel. Isaiah prophesied that from these tribes in the place where they settled when they came into the Promised Land would emerge the Messiah. And Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is now living in this area, again pointing to Jesus as God's Messiah and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

With John's arrest and Jesus' move to Capernaum, Jesus will begin to proclaim to the people in Galilee, some 300,000 people, to repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. John's proclamation of repentance was done in the wilderness along the Jordan River. Jesus also has repentance as part of his teaching, making a connection to John, but unlike John, Jesus will make his proclamation in the 200 + cities and towns throughout Galilee. Jesus will travel this region extensively over the next three years with his disciples following him.

We may find it helpful to recall that when Old Testament prophets spoke about the coming of God's Messiah, their message had at least three consistent aspects to the prophetic hope they shared with God's people. First, the words they spoke for God to the people held that it was necessary for God to transform His people, giving to them a new heart and a new spirit. Second, God through his Messiah would transform human society usually understood as the restoration of Israel to the Promised Land, the rebuilding of cities in that land, and using Israel as a witness to the nations. And finally, the prophets' words proclaimed that God will transform

nature from its current situation to the restored creation it once was.<sup>1</sup> The people of Israel have these expectations of the Messiah and as they look for the coming One, they look for him to implement their concept of the actions they associate with a true Messiah.

Jesus is the great light that has come into the world, a light that shines into the darkness. Those who live in the area are confronted with the darkness stemming in part from the worship of false gods by the Gentiles surrounding them, and it is into such a dark place that Jesus comes as light from God shining into the lives of those who have long sat in the shadow of death, eternal death. Jesus will redefine our understanding of what it means to be God's Messiah. Israel was looking for a military and/or political leader who would come with a great army ready to fight to free and restore Israel. Jesus comes alone but begins to call his disciples, those who will follow him in his ministry in Galilee. The normal process in Israel for a rabbi or teacher to receive a disciple was for the interested student to approach the teacher and request to learn from the rabbi and be part of the teacher's group of students or disciples. It would be as if Peter told Andrew one morning that he had decided to ask Jesus if he could be his student and follow him and he would go and ask Jesus to be his teacher. That is not how Jesus' calling works. Jesus' call to those he will have follow him is very different from the normal rabbi/student process. Jesus' call is far more similar to the way Elijah called Elisha when the time came for Elijah to find his replacement. Jesus is the one who will do the calling. Jesus will not head into Jerusalem to call religious leaders of Israel or look for Zealots who have military training and are ready to fight to see Israel freed from Roman rule. Instead, Jesus will walk the shores of the Sea of Galilee and call fishermen to be his companions. Fishermen are not impoverished, but they are not among the affluent. Jesus comes first to Andrew and Simon who are casting their net into the sea. Jesus calls them, telling them, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." These two have known of Jesus for some time, are aware of Jesus' teaching, and when Jesus calls, they are ready to immediately leave their nets and follow Jesus.

Jesus goes a little farther down the beach and sees James and John with their father in a boat mending their nets. Jesus calls James and John to come and follow him, telling them also that he will make them fishers of men. They immediately leave their boat, nets, and father and follow Jesus. Jesus' call to these disciples is with authority and they are immediately ready to leave behind what they have known and what is comfortable to them to go and follow Jesus. Their willingness to go immediately speaks to a past time of developing familiarity with Jesus, a

time of learning more about him and what he teaches, but now Jesus has called them to move from familiar things to be participants in his mission to the people who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

When we reflect on Matthew's account of Jesus' call to these disciples to come and follow him and become fishers of men, we may wonder if Jesus has called us to come and follow him to learn to be fishers of people. We should all take time to ask ourselves, "What part of Jesus' mission to all people are we called to?" and "Where are we to follow Jesus?" As we follow Jesus, our understanding of what it means to be called into a journey with Jesus will continually deepen and become a clearer calling. Our first call is a summons to repentance and faith in Jesus as our Lord and savior, the Messiah of God, and to become one of Jesus' disciples. In this level of call, we enter into a time of walking with Jesus that we might learn who he is and to see him work in our lives and the lives of those around us. It is a call to faith in Jesus, faith that redeems us to God. In this level of calling, we are those who are beginning to turn to Jesus. It is a time for us to hear God's word, to read God's word, and to observe how Jesus is working and has worked in the lives of the people of the church. It is a call to prepare ourselves to step into Jesus' mission, to begin to surrender ourselves to Jesus and to walk with him more closely each day. These four disciples had already met Jesus and have believed him to be the Messiah, the chosen one of God. They were familiar with Jesus, his teaching, proclamation, and works among the people in their community. These four disciples had begun to seek to grow their relationship with Jesus, but were still working at their vocations as fishermen as seen in their casting and mending of nets.

Another level of calling that we might expect is a call to move from the pews, Bible studies, and classrooms of the church we are attending to grow in our familiarity with Jesus and step into leadership in our local church, the church we have chosen to attend. Leadership may be stepping into a teaching role to help others learn more about Jesus and, through Jesus, to learn about God. We might find ourselves leading a group of people reading the Bible together so that they too might grow in their familiarity with Jesus. We might be called to step into roles that allow the local church to function and be a place for others to come to faith in Jesus, filling administrative roles, helping to maintain the church building, or being a part of worship. Some will find a call in serving others, giving a drink to the thirsty, lending a hand to meet needs, or

encouraging others. The type of calling is where we begin to step more fully into Jesus' mission as we grow in our understanding of Jesus and how to extend his love to others.

Another level of calling that a person may find is to "repent of a devotion to Jesus that is only half-hearted and to give him or herself more fully to Jesus."<sup>ii</sup> The conviction of this call comes from Holy Spirit acting in our lives as we open ourselves more fully to the calling of Jesus in our lives. Revival always begins with repentance and if we find ourselves sitting in church wondering if we are half-heartedly following our Lord who seeks our full heart, then we are most likely experiencing Holy Spirit's conviction and need to repent and seek to be open to Jesus' call to us in the now of our lives. We are to let Holy Spirit lead us into a deeper following of Jesus. As we ask ourselves if our hearts are fully committed to Jesus, we should be willing to come before him in prayer and listen for his voice to speak to us through his word. Listening is not praying about our hearts' desires and then letting our Bibles fall open to a passage and placing our finger somewhere on the page and taking those words as God's direction. Listening is learning to pray and daily listen with our hearts as we read scripture for God's guidance. We may get a direct conviction from God, but more likely, if we develop a spiritual practice of praying and seeking to listen for God's response to our prayers through our reading of Scripture, we will begin to learn of God's response to our prayers.

We are not called to busyness, hurry, or frantic seeking of Jesus. Busyness is a snare for pastors and laity alike. We are not called to spend our every moment doing something for Jesus. We are called to walk with Jesus, to join him on a journey. Jesus' yoke is light and his burden is easy. If we find ourselves overwhelmed by trying to get everything we can think of done for Jesus and are overcome with the burden we are seeking to carry, we need to look for others to help us carry the burden we have taken up or to simply set down the burden we are carrying and to walk with Jesus more fully, seeking his guidance for our calling.

We also need to be careful that we don't miss Jesus' call and begin to replace his call with our own idea of calling. Jesus's call to these fishermen is to follow him and he will make them fishers of men, or people. We tend to not focus on what Jesus is calling us to do, become fishers of people, but to focus where we are comfortable. E. V. Hill, a somewhat well-known writer and pastor, stated our tendency in calling in this way: "The church throughout the centuries has struggled with the temptation to be 'keepers of the aquarium instead of fishers of men.'"<sup>iii</sup> If we find this same struggle in our church today, a tendency to come to church and just

work with those there, we too have joined the Church's propensity to focus inwardly and feed the fish we have and know. Instead, we are to follow Jesus and learn to be those who are catching people and bringing them into the kingdom of God.

Before we leave the disciples and their experience with calling this morning, let me point out that as these disciples are called by Jesus, they immediately act, leaving behind key aspects of their lives. Peter and Andrew leave behind their nets and James and John leave behind their nets, boat, and earthly father. A call to follow Jesus comes with a cost. Jesus has called his chosen disciples to a new vocation, leaving behind their lives as fishermen and following Jesus that they may now fish for people. Jesus is calling us in this same manner and we need to be ready to respond immediately to such a call, although from my own experience, we may find it a struggle to leave behind our current lives in a responsible manner. We see Peter leave his nets here, but later we find his house as a center for Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and it appears that there is a fishing boat or boats that are available for Jesus to use as he travels around Galilee. We, like Peter, may find that what we are being asked to do is to open our hearts to Jesus to fully use the blessings that we have received from God for his mission. We may find we are called to open our homes for others to be caught not in a physical net and dragged to church, but in nets of loving relationships we have developed with people, nets we are being led and guided to cast into new places so that others may be brought through Jesus' love into the kingdom of God.

Let Holy Spirit stir our hearts and, as we repent of our resistance to Jesus' call, let us seek through prayer and listening for God's voice in scripture His guidance into new callings so that the people in our community may find themselves caught in nets of loving relationships and drawn into a relationship with Jesus Christ and into the kingdom of God.

*Pray with me: Jesus, open our hearts that we might see you standing on the seashore of our lives and hear you call us to be those who are fishing for people. Lord, we place before you all that we are and all we have received from your hand that we might love your people in a manner that they are caught and swept into the kingdom of God. Jesus, help us to hear your call in our lives and to immediately respond, not counting cost but with praise and great joy. We pray this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> Donald Gowan Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 174). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 185). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition

<sup>iii</sup> Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 189). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.