

Sermon Text on Matthew 4:12-23

This week has been a week of anticipation and preparation for this winter storm we are having. In my house, one of the biggest concerns of the kids is what will happen if we lose power – how will we see? How will we keep warm? And of course, the most pressing concern of all – What will we do without the internet? I have done my best to assure them that if we lose power, it will be ok. That we are prepared, and that even though being in the dark will not be fun, we have plenty of lanterns and flashlights to drive away the darkness (and thankfully, a gas heater in the apartment above the garage, should we need to hang out there). But the kids have a little bit of anxiety about the storm and what could happen.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus begins his public ministry, it is not in a moment of calm or safety. It begins with bad news. John has been arrested, and fear is in the air. Herod is bringing his worldly power to bear against his testimony. He is sending a message, “this is what happens when you threaten my power.” And it is precisely then, in that moment, that Jesus moves into Galilee and begins to proclaim good news.

Matthew looks back to the prophet Isaiah to make sense of this moment – Isaiah said, “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.” Much like last week where we heard the first calling story of the disciples in John’s gospel, this lesson from Matthew also helps set the tone for all of Jesus’ mission and ministry. Before Jesus calls disciples, before he heals anyone, before he preaches the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew wants us to understand this: Jesus’ ministry is like light entering darkness – it is hope entering spaces that are shaped by fear, violence, and empire.

And then Jesus calls fishermen. Again, like the passage we read last week in John’s gospel, Jesus doesn’t begin with a sermon, or a miracle, or a list of instructions. He begins instead with an invitation: “Follow me.” And then he adds something that has been deeply misunderstood or misused: “I will make you fish for people.” Too often, that phrase has been used to justify coercion or conquest, as if faith were about baiting, trapping, or winning people over. But Matthew’s gospel will not allow that reading. These fishermen know the depths. Jesus calls them not to capture people, but to cast wide nets into the deep waters of humanity, trusting that God meets people there. To be fishers of people is to enter the places where life is complex and vulnerable and to participate in God’s work of love and restoration. It is to go where people are drowning under systems that crush dignity and call it order.

Immediately after this passage, Jesus will say: “You are the light of the world.” He doesn’t word this in the future tense, but the present. You are the light of the world right now. And in

Matthew's Gospel, that light is never abstract. It looks like something like touching a leper and restoring him to community, or like feeding hungry crowds instead of sending them away. It looks like breaking Sabbath rules to heal a withered hand or like eating with tax collectors and sinners. It looks like confronting religious leaders for neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness. It looks like refusing to ignore suffering, even when doing so is costly. This is what fishing for people looks like in Matthew. It is not about pulling people into religious systems, but about casting deep nets to participate in God's work of healing.

Another important thing to notice is that Jesus does not say, "Go fish for people." He says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." In other words, Jesus isn't sending his disciples off to go do a thing on their own in their own way in the name of Jesus. It is an invitation to go with Jesus. It is an invitation to formation. The disciples are not sent out alone. They are shaped by their proximity to Jesus, by walking where he walks, stopping where he stops, paying attention to who he sees.

And that matters, because when light confronts darkness, it often creates tension. As we hear Jesus call Simon, Andrew, James, and John, ordinary laborers, to follow him and become fishers of people, we too are called into a mission rooted in light and justice. Matthew says that Jesus went into Galilee, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that people sitting in darkness have seen a great light. That light is not passive. It pushes outward into places of fear, suffering, and systemic harm.

In our own time, we see something similar in the witness unfolding in Minneapolis and across Minnesota. Just this past week, tens of thousands of people took to the cold streets in protests against federal immigration enforcement actions, actions that have included aggressive raids, controversial detentions like those of five year old Liam Ramos, harassment and arrest of US citizens by ICE, the killing of Renee Good, and just yesterday, the killing of another US citizen who was already on the ground, being beaten by several ICE agents.

On the frontlines were hundreds of clergy: pastors, rabbis, priests, and other leaders from across many traditions. On Friday, they stood together in prayer and protest at the Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport. In an act of conscience, about 100 of those clergy were arrested as they knelt in prayer and peacefully demonstrated against practices they judged to be harmful to immigrant families and their broader communities.

Some of these leaders, (which included United Methodist clergy, by the way), said they felt compelled by their faith to stand with neighbors who live in fear, embodying a prophetic witness that echoes Jeremiah's call to seek the welfare of the city and Jesus' own life of compassion and risk.

This witness offered by hundreds of clergy and thousands of others, is not about politics for politics' sake. It is about bearing witness to the dignity of every human being, especially those on the margins, those most vulnerable to violence, fear, and dehumanization. It is about living out the conviction that no one made in the image of God should be treated as less than human.

When Jesus calls the first disciples, he invites them into a transformation of their very way of life. He doesn't send them into the world to win arguments or to dominate others. He calls them to be sojourners, co-laborers with him in the restoration of God's beloved creation: to align with the light Jesus brings into places of darkness, to notice the suffering of neighbors, especially those systemically pushed aside, and to risk comfort and safety for the sake of justice and mercy.

This week in Minnesota, faithful witnesses reminded us what that looks like in concrete ways in this particular moment of time. They walked shoulder to shoulder with their neighbors, crossing lines of race, tradition, and denomination. They prayed and sang hymns in the streets, naming God's call to compassion. They willingly faced arrest, not for spectacle, but as an act of solidarity with families and children caught up in fear and forced separation.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' ministry is filled with moments of healing, mercy, and courageous love when he touches lepers, feeds the hungry, and challenges those in power to prioritize justice and mercy. That same light continues to move today, calling us not only to believe but also to act – to fish for people not by coercion, but by calling forth life, dignity, and community in the face of systems that threaten them.

When Jesus says, "Follow me," he is inviting us into that kind of life – a life where we see the world as Jesus sees it, with compassion for the marginalized and courage to stand up to injustice. He is inviting us to stand with those whose voices are muted by fear, poverty, or by being targets of aggression meant to silence. He is inviting us to bear witness that the light of Christ is stronger than fear, stronger than oppression, stronger than despair.

Being fishers of people in today's world means we follow Jesus into places where love and justice meet together, not only in our words, but in our presence, our advocacy, our solidarity, and, when necessary, our willingness to face consequences for righteousness' sake.

Jesus is still walking along shorelines, just like he did when he called those first disciples. He is still walking along the edges of our comfort, our assumptions, and our routines, saying: "Follow me." "Follow me into places where light is needed. Follow me into love that costs something. Follow me into justice that heals rather than harms."

And when we do, we discover that being fishers of people really means becoming people who bear the light of Christ – not because we ourselves create the light, but because we walk close enough to Jesus to reflect it. May we be the people who have seen the great light, who have heard the call, “Follow me,” who have left our nets aside to go with Jesus, wherever he may lead us. Amen.