

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Light of the World

Sermon Reflection Notes

The scripture this week begins with “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.” John was arrested. It’s not part of the story of Jesus on which we spend a lot of time, and we must skip over to chapter 14 to even find out why. John was arrested because he was willing to tell the King, Herod Antipas, that it was not okay to marry his brother’s wife, Herodias. Herod would have killed John right away, but John had quite a following and Herod was worried about the PR of murdering a religious celebrity. But, after some convincing from Herodias’s daughter, John was killed. John was arrested and killed for being a prophet willing to speak truth to the political powers of his day.

This past week, we remembered the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., another prophetic voice who was willing to speak truth to power; he, too, was arrested. He too had an unwavering commitment to holiness, justice, and peace which put him in direct conflict with the deeply entrenched racism of his day which ultimately cost him his life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was thrown in prison for his work within the Confessing Church’s resistance to Hitler. Bonhoeffer, like John the Baptist, like Martin Luther King Jr., understood that proclaiming God’s truth in the face of a tyrannical regime is dangerous. And it cost him his life too. And as Jesus’ earthly ministry begins, with the same message that John the Baptist preached (*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*), Matthew is foreshadowing that Jesus will surely meet a similar fate.

The politics of Jesus is a different kind of politics. It is not partisan or based on any earthly kingdom. The politics of Jesus, the Kingdom of God, is a theological and political vision centered around the great commandments of loving God and loving neighbor. Of caring for the poor and the outcast. It reflects an intense yearning for a sociopolitical order based on the will of God for justice and fairness for all people.

When Jesus heard of John’s arrest, he went back home to Galilee—but he made his way to the seashore, to the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Matthew tells us that this was to fulfill the words from Isaiah chapter 9:

Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,

On the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles--

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.

When Isaiah 9 was written, the Hebrew people were separated into two kingdoms. They were in a period of ‘distress and darkness’, facing invasion from the Assyrian Empire in the north. And as the Israelite people sat in the darkness of cruelty, oppression, and violence, Isaiah audaciously wrote: “*I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.*” God may be hard to find, but Isaiah will wait and hope. Isaiah was faithful enough to say to the hurting people of Zebulun and Naphtali, “*The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.*”

And now Jesus had moved into Isaiah's seaside neighborhood. Matthew is telling us that Jesus is the light that has shined. The people, again, find themselves in darkness, under the thumb of another imperial power, and Jesus is the hope for the future of Capernaum and all of Israel. Isaiah called this area the 'Galilee of the Gentiles.' The great road connecting Egypt to Mesopotamia ran right past Galilee and the epicenter of Jesus' ministry. Because it was such a significant trade route, not everyone who lived there was Jewish. It was a melting pot, and the message is clear. The light that shines is not just good news for the Jews, but for all people.

It is in this region that Jesus, taking a walk along the beach, sees Simon and Andrew fishing. Jesus didn't wait for them to discover who he was. He went to them, to where they worked and gave them a metaphor that would make sense to them: *"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people."* He then went to James and John with the same message. And they did it. These men, with plenty to leave behind, followed Jesus into a new livelihood, a new reason for existing, a new identity. They followed Jesus and became part of something bigger than they ever dreamed.

Jesus doesn't call us to join a church, or spend time in service to the community, or commit to a set of particular denominational beliefs. He calls us, as he called the disciples, and Martin Luther King Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to follow him. It's a call to complete allegiance to the politics of Jesus, the Kingdom of God. Are we willing to drop our nets and follow Jesus with the same urgency as the disciples? Even if it puts us at odds with the world around us? Even if it's dangerous? Following Jesus is a commitment to a kingdom that puts love of God and love of neighbor above comfort. It puts justice ahead of institutions, and it puts faithfulness above safety.

The Kingdom of God has come near. And Jesus is calling. Let's follow together.

Scripture

Matthew 4:12-23 (NRSVUE)

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so 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—

¹⁶ 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."

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

¹⁸ As 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 fishers. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As 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. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the word *politics* mean to you? At its most neutral level, what is *politics*?
2. *The politics of Jesus is a different kind of politics.* What does that mean?
3. Almost from the beginning of Christianity, powerful people have claimed that Jesus is apolitical--not interested or involved in politics. How does that claim dilute the teachings of Jesus?
4. There's a difference between listening to what someone says and listening to how someone interprets what someone says. What does Jesus say about how we are to treat one another?
5. With Simon and Andrew, with Dietrich and Martin, how do we respond to Jesus, who calls us to follow him?

Closing Prayer

Holy and always grace filled God, our hearts are breaking even as the walls of our life together in our nation and in our world seem to be breaking down around us. And so, we thank you this day for those faithful ones among us who continue to stand against injustice, we thank you for those who continue to sing us toward your promise that your light will indeed come, and we thank you for these texts that remind us that we are not alone. For that great cloud of witnesses who watch and wait and pray us into faithfulness we give you thanks. Help us to follow the way of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

"Jesus is calling. Will we follow?"