

"A Heaven-ish Empire" (22Jan17)
Matt4:12-23; 1Cor1:10-18

This Sunday marks the anniversary of Pastor Sonja and me starting here and preaching our first sermons at MCC. It makes me think back to those days a year ago, meeting you, figuring out how this wild system of two shared congregations functions, and details for an annual meeting a week away, and even what streets to take to get here.

This Gospel reading has a similar feel, right? So much happening at once. It's the first glimpse of Jesus' ministry (not that I'm trying to compare myself to him, I'm just talking hectic beginnings) with many details of him moving to a new home, he's preaching, he's meeting people, calling them to follow (and they have their own hectic new beginnings), Jesus is going around healing and teaching and curing. Bizzy!

But amid the details of this first glimpse of a public Jesus and what he'll be up to until the end, one bit right away grabbed my attention this week. The passage starts: "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested..." That detail feels peculiar. It seems to indicate that Jesus' ministry didn't come out of fulfilled preparation or special readiness. It didn't say, "Now after Jesus had earned his Master of Divinity degree and was approved by the synod..." Nor does it attribute this to internal enthusiasm with some sort of spiritual motivation, that God nudged Jesus to use his gifts as who he was truly meant to be. He wasn't looking for opportunity, as if perusing job listings and weighing his options until he decided to pack up shop and move down to the lakeshore instead of staying with the family carpentry business back in his hometown.

No, what really seems to have gotten the ball rolling on what Jesus would accomplish in a couple short years and what would try to be shut down and stifled as he was executed, and what continues as the movement that maybe

your parents introduced you to when you were but an infant and that keeps bringing you here now, what started all of this huge and vital process, according to that first sentence from Matthew this morning, was a crisis, was that John got arrested.

Again, just to make sure we're really getting it, that wouldn't have been the obvious choice. If Jesus felt close to John and was impressed by him and even echoed some of John's preaching, then this isn't exactly when he should take up the mantle of a mentor, but would've been a good time to lay low and hide out and not make waves. Not only does Jesus start his work amid a moment of crisis, but clearly from John's example, this is dangerous.

That is emphasized by the setting in the reading, though it doesn't quite jump out at us. Matthew likes to quote from the Hebrew Bible and tell us that Jesus was fulfilling those writings. He does it 15 times, way more than any other writer. We need not take it as if prophets were predicting details about Jesus so much as Matthew saw the old story, God's story resonates in the life of Jesus, and the ancient story has continuity in this new community.

At any rate, in this case the words from the Isaiah that Matthew uses describe Jesus' setting as the land "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." Being under the shadow of death certainly must be a description for crisis and danger, so there's that awareness with the start of Jesus' ministry.

Still more, it describes Capernaum as "on the road by the sea" and as a region "of the Gentiles." Those are doubly dangerous terms. The region of Gentiles indicates it's far from the heart of the faith. This isn't amid other Jewish believers near the temple in Jerusalem, but is out in the hinterlands, surrounded by non-believers.

Maybe worse, this so-called "road by the sea" means the Via Maris, an ancient highway that ran from Egypt to Damascus and far beyond. It was a route for international trade under the supervision of the Roman Empire. Those people who have sat in darkness far from the safe nightlight glow of their religious stronghold were instead under the watchful lurking eye of a foreign government's military occupation. Capernaum was a highway wayside, where people were trying to eke out existence as a meager and maybe forlorn group of believers. These people are at all kinds of apparent loss—of their health, of their security, of control, of any sort of prestige and power. And Jesus himself is at a loss as John the Baptist has been imprisoned.

To reiterate once more: in that dark setting, Jesus began. Amid this shadow of loss, the light Jesus casts is counter to the empire. Again, it may not jump out in our translation, but he's confrontational when he says that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Rather than picturing a palace in the clouds, we could more meaningfully title it something like "the heaven-ish empire." This is the same when Jesus has us pray, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven." It's about how God would have earth run, the shape of life under God's authority instead of Caesar's. It should leave no surprise from the get-go that darkness tries to overcome light and such talk and such actions are going to get Jesus crucified; he is boldly proclaiming this new empire in enemy territory, offering an alternative community directly in the face of reigning powers.

Again, as he calls those first pairs of brothers, he's transferring or relocating them out of the Kingdom of Rome. In leaving behind their nets and boats and role as fishermen, Jesus is pulling them out of a job that was indentured labor for the imperial economy. These guys paid taxes in order to get out on the water, and then their catch mostly went to

palaces of oppressive leaders. They weren't enjoying Friday night fish fries of what they caught; rather, they were left with only boiled down glueyness of guts and otherwise unappealing parts of the fish. Jesus is inviting them to abandon that life of captivity for a risky new role of fishing for people.

The same vision of the heaven-ish empire's new community is also embodied in the mention of healings. One theologian says the Gospel talks so much about sick people because *"Roman imperial structures and practices were bad for people's health. Some 70-90 percent of folks in Rome's empire experienced varying degrees of poverty... [and] Such factors resulted in widespread diseases associated with poor nutrition (blindness; muscle weakness etc.) and a lack of immunity (diarrhea; cholera etc.)...[So] Jesus' healings are acts that repair imperial damage and enact God's life-giving empire in restoring people's lives."**

Though that could be close to raising questions of government and health care, our reading from 1st Corinthians portrays this new community in ways which might be still closer to our reality gathered here. Paul reiterates that we are people of the cross, baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather than the too-human distinctions of earthly power structures, this is our core identity now. Again, this transfers your allegiance from the old Kingdom into the new community of equals, of mutual care, of shared responsibility. We don't define ourselves against each other, but with each other, together.

Paul's appeal is that in Jesus we should recognize no divisions among ourselves, but should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. In that congregation, it meant revising how they settled legal disputes and how they served meals and how they viewed the less talented among them. It reconfigured

* https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3138 (Warren Carter)

relationships between the wealthy and poor, the high class and the hungry, the wisely cultured and the vulnerably foolish, how they interacted in marital relationships and sexual ethics, and even how they understood the living and the dead.

I'm going to break there. That's loads of ancient background, though I hope it helps you sense how vibrant and vital this gathering here is, critical (amid crisis), a matter of death and new life, confrontation with empires on each other's behalf. It's the spreading graciousness of the heaven-ish empire that is welcoming you, continuing to transfer you to a new community and to strengthen your resistance. In shorthand, this Godly way of meeting the darkness of crisis with the light of enlarged caring community is often known briefly as "love."

I'm not going to spell out specifics of how to love or to do better at living into this central and critical identity we share in Christ, of how you're enacting the ancient story, or go into political descriptions, or forecast what standing up against imperial forces means in our world now among crises and dangers we face in our own dark setting.

Instead, with just a brief glimpse of the struggle in more modern settings, I want to share another passage from Martin Luther King, in which he happens to use our Bible passage from this morning. Here you go: He begins in noting the "sad fact" that we resist participating in the beloved community *because of comfort, complacency, a morbid fear of [enemies], and our proneness to adjust to injustice...* [Yet, he says,] *These are revolutionary times. All over the globe [people] are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wounds of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." ... America, the richest and most powerful nation in the*

*world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities so that the pursuit of [love] will take precedence over the pursuit of [hate]. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brother [and sister]hood.***

And, with that reiteration of Jesus' invitation and sharing Rev. King's expectancy of new birth, finally the one other reflection I offer was shared with me that the darkness around us isn't always the darkness of the tomb, but may be the darkness of the womb as we're emerging into the light of new possibilities, new life, new relationships. I continue to be glad to be sharing that with you.

** "A Time to Break Silence" in *A Testament of Hope*, p241-2