

Matthew 4:12-23 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus Begins His Ministry in Galilee

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.”

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

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 fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for 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.

Jesus Ministers to Crowds of People

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

A few weeks ago, as I was looking at the sermon series that I was going to do while Pastor Joe was out, I took a look at this passage. I did not originally think I was going to be preaching this week, but as I look at selections of scripture—especially selections from the lectionary, as were moving through this journey this year through at the Gospel of Matthew— I like to look at where we’re going. What's the next step on this journey? And I took a look at this selection from Matthew 4 and I thought to myself “man, that is all over the place,” You've got John being arrested and a prophecy being fulfilled in Jesus beginning to preach and Jesus calling the disciples and the disciples responding and then you have

Jesus going and healing every kind of disease and sickness. It is all over the place in this passage. So I thought to myself “man, I am glad that I am not preaching *that* week.” And then God and Joe Casteel said “Just kidding!” But as I begin to play connect-the-dots with all of the pieces of this passage this week, I decided to take that same approach not just look at this week’s scripture but look where this is heading. And more than just next week when we’re in Matthew 5, I wanted to look and see where we are ultimately going.

We’re at the beginning of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples here. You have his first conversation with them and it stuck out to me as I began to look at this that we are really still the very beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. Because as much time as I have spent teaching at the *beginning* of the Gospel of John and as much time as I've spent teaching the *beginning* of the Gospel of Mark... it's really the *end* I've spent much more time teaching out of the Gospel of Matthew. Anybody know if that is what's at the end of this book? That's Matthew chapter 28 and it's the great commission.

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

These two passages are bookends to Jesus’ entire relationship with the disciples. Chapter four is the introduction and Chapter twenty-eight the ending. And I remember being taught how to write papers or give presentations in school and being told that there’s a way to lay out what you’re doing. You tell them what you're **going** to tell them... you **tell** them... and then you tell them what you **told** them. Introduction, **meat**, conclusion. So Jesus spends the next three years of his

public ministry and his time with the disciples teaching them all that he has to say and all that he does. These scriptures are the conversations where he sets them up for what's coming and then reminds them of all that they have learned.

So we get a much clearer picture of what he means in this introduction by looking at the end. Sort of like an M. Night Shayamalan movie or how you watch all the Star Wars movies differently once you've seen *Empire Strikes Back*.

At the end, Jesus is **sending** his disciples out after spending all this time teaching them. And as he gives the great commission to "go and make disciples," he reminds them how he has already taught them to do that. He says "go make disciples... and remember that you're going to do that by baptizing them and teaching them to obey." Teaching them to walk closely with Jesus, to follow his example and commands, to live life like Jesus... that's discipleship. That's what we talked about last week. So there's the first half. **Baptizing** them... that's just as important. And Jesus saying "Baptize them," is his way of telling them to bring people in. Into the fellowship.

Look at what we do in baptism in the United Methodist Church. That is the beginning point for us in a walk of faith. Whether that is an adult who is just professing faith for the first time or whether that is a brand-new baby born into a family of faith. Either way what we're doing is welcoming them into the wider Christian community through baptism. And so the word for both **what we are incorporated into** in baptism and what we do as a church as we **live out the celebration of our own baptism**, this is the thing called fellowship.

So as Jesus is inviting these disciples along for the ride and setting them up for all that they're going to do, he is inviting them in to true Christian fellowship.

Fellowship is a word that gets misused in Christian conversations. We say we have a fellowship hall and that's where we hang out in between worship services. Or we're going to have a fellowship night which might mean we'll have food and coffee and spending time together. But that is such a lazy definition of fellowship. If discipleship that we talked about last week is **doing life intentionally with Jesus** then fellowship is **doing life intentionally with each other**. And even in the very brief interaction that is recorded between Jesus and his disciples in these verses he's already showing them all of the places to look for that fellowship.

The first place that fellowship looks is up. Fellowship looks UP to God. The very first thing with Jesus does is he begins to preach here and what is he preaching he says "repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Now I don't know about you but I still think of "repent" as a kind of scary word. I can't help but think of it in that sort of those old testament terms where we see stories that seem to say "repent... or else." Like Jonah going to Nineveh and telling the people that they have 40 days to repent of their sins or they'll have to face God's wrath. Or seeing Sodom and Gomorrah actually face destruction as punishment. So it's odd at first glance that Jesus who accepts God's wrath on our behalf, who accepts the wrath of the government as he is charged, convicted, sentenced, and crucified, but who *doesn't* go around pouring out wrath on people... it's odd at first glance to see him say "repent" if we understand that word as the word of impending wrath. But the word repent means "to turn", and so we should understand it as a word of hope. And we see that hope even in the Old Testament.

We see it when these groups are told to repent and to turn from their sins, because if **they and if we** are told to **turn from** something, we are also always

turning **to** something. If we turn **from**, we turn **to**. When we repent of our sins of our falling short of the things that separate us from God then we turn to God. And so Jesus is telling them “repent” not **or else** but repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. Hope! Hope is here! You can repent and that’s a great thing. Put your hope in God. Turn towards God. God the Son is saying “turn towards me.”

And so this is where fellowship really brushes up against discipleship because all of us are following Jesus but we are following him together.

Fellowship also looks IN to the community. It looks in at the group that's gathered around Jesus. And with Jesus it is always a group. Remember Breen said about discipleship that it’s not singular either. A disciple is not a disciple unless they make another disciple. Fellowship certainly isn’t singular either. It’s never about ME and Jesus, it’s about US and Jesus. Here even at the start he doesn't say to any singular individual “you, you person follow me.” He said last week to a pair of John's disciples and he says this week to two pairs of brothers and new disciples “y’all, follow me.” Or “come and see” as it was phrased and John's Gospel. Come and see. You’re invited. And you're invited into a group, into this community to which you belong. Because fellowship, and ultimately the Church doesn't stop at just believing, it continues into belonging. When a child is baptized during the 11:00 service, we sing a song called “God claims you.” “**Daniel, Daniel,** God Claims You...” That’s out of a United Methodist Hymnal supplement called “The Faith We Sing.” We sing those words because we believe them. We don’t say “we’ve had a ceremony and we’re happy and that’s it.” But we say God claims you. You’re a part of God’s family along with us now. Good, bad, and ugly, you’re one of us, incorporated by baptism into the family of God.

Every once in a while a song will come along on the radio that makes me think “That would be better in a hymnal than on the radio.” Whether they always get the theology right or not, there are those songs of faith that make their way onto the pop charts. In the early 70s that might've been “Spirit in the Sky” or in the early 2000's that might have been “I can only imagine,” or just a few years ago the song “Something to Believe in,” But that song like that that best speaks to me of fellowship is another one from the 70's. It became a camp song and sometimes still a youth group song. The Bill Withers song “Lean on Me.”

Lean on me, when you're not strong

And I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on

For it won't be long, 'Til I'm gonna need

Somebody to lean on

We lean on Jesus in our discipleship habits, in prayer and in scripture. But what an incredible gift the Church is to us from God as a gift of community. And Jesus built that in from the start. His disciples got to experience fellowship in meals together, in parades into Jerusalem (**you can't have a parade with just one person**), in teaching time on the lake, in quiet time up the mountain, Jesus did these things with a group. But even after the crucifixion, what did the disciples end up doing? They gathered in the upper room. They experienced their fear and their grief and their confusion **together**. This is where fellowship brushes up against ministry, because Jesus gave us the community of the church to lean on.

So Jesus points us in fellowship up to the father, and in towards our brothers and sisters, but he points us out to the world. Even in his gathering in of

the disciples he isn't setting up this exclusive club. He's offering them an example of what they're to continue to do. In the same sentence he says "follow me," he says "I will make you fish for people."

That's a good line to these fishermen. "Hey, you're fishing for fish, I'm gonna teach you to fish for people!" It's catchy. But it's not just to catch their attention. He's serious about this. Remember the bookend? Three years later he's telling them "okay, you've been in close proximity to me and to each other long enough. You've been in the holy huddle long enough." It's time to go out. Fellowship brushes up against evangelism here because we're moving from "I'll teach you to fish for people," to "go fish."

On New Year's Day I played a clip of Bishop Palmer who asked "What do you have that you have not received?" Well I ask this morning "What have you received that you shouldn't be giving away?" Countries say "Us first." Clubs say "us and not you." The church's fellowship says "You too." What we've got we want to give away. We as individual members say not just "I'm selfish and I need the church to lean on." But we say "I recognize this community is a gift and I want to offer it preemptively to you. Lean on me. Come and see. You're invited in."

Fellowship is more than a line from a song or a line for the potluck. It's a lifestyle of following in togetherness. As we follow Jesus, we say "come along with us."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy spirit, Amen.