

## Epiphany 3A 2020 Sermon Annual Meeting Sunday

### **Matthew 4:12-23**

*When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:*

*“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.”*

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

*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. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*

*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.*

This year in our Lectionary, most of our Gospel readings will be coming from the Gospel of Matthew. Now, from the very beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, Matthew lets us know that a major theme of his Gospel will be the clash of kingdoms: the Kingdom of **this** world’s economy, culture, nations, and leaders over and against the Kingdom which Jesus announces: the Kingdom of Heaven.

Only in Matthew’s Gospel do we hear the story of the Wise Men, who journeyed from far-away Persia to Jerusalem, where they asked King Herod, the king of the Jews, where the *new* king of the Jews was to be born (Matt. 2:2). Right there, with Jesus’ birth, we see the clash of kingdoms: Who is the *true* King of the Jews – the powerful and ruthless Herod, who had killed 3 of his own sons, and would order that all boys in or around Bethlehem under the age of 2 be slaughtered (Matt. 2:16)? Or Jesus, whom Matthew has already told us is “Immanuel, God with us” (Matt. 1:23), but who will later be mocked with a crown of thorns as “king of the Jews,” and crucified (Matt. 27:29)? And Matthew, in his Gospel, is not just alluding to Herod, but also to the Roman Emperor, or to *any* earthly ruler, past or present. Who is the *true* king? And whose kingdom is the *true* kingdom?

Those are questions Matthew wants *us* to ask ourselves.

John the Baptist came preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matt. 3:2).” Today’s Gospel lesson begins with the *arrest* of John the Baptist, but John’s message is *immediately* taken up by Jesus, who says exactly the same words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In Matthew’s Gospel, this is Jesus’ main message. Richard Rohr writes, “...the Reign or Kingdom of God... is the subject of [Jesus’] inaugural address (Luke 4:14-30), his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and most of his parables. Indeed, it is the guiding image of Jesus’ entire ministry.”<sup>1</sup> “Jesus clearly says the kingdom of heaven is among us [or within us] (Luke 17:21) or ‘at hand’ (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). This realm appears to be his singular and constant message.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, if the kingdom of Heaven is indeed “the guiding image of Jesus’ entire ministry,” it behooves us to ask: “What does Jesus *mean* when he speaks of the ‘kingdom of Heaven’ (or the kingdom of God or the reign of God)?” Perhaps Episcopal priest and author Cynthia Bourgeault comes close to a succinct description when she writes, “the Kingdom of Heaven is really a metaphor for a state of consciousness; it is not a place you *go* to, but a place you *come* from. It is a whole new way of looking at the world, a transformed awareness that literally turns this world into a different place”<sup>3</sup> because we see it with new eyes – the eyes of Christ, the eyes of our soul. Instead of using the word “repent” (which can carry a lot of baggage for some folk,) other English translations of today’s Gospel have Jesus say, “Turn to God and change the way you think and act, because the kingdom of heaven is here!” (Matthew 4:17, GW, the Message) Turn to God and change the way you think and act, because the kingdom of heaven is here!

But, “changing the way we think and act” is no small task! Richard Rohr says that “we are all addicted to our own habitual way of thinking and doing. These attachments are at first hidden to us. [And] we cannot heal what we do not first acknowledge.”<sup>4</sup>

Fr. John Shea puts it this way: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand but people do not know how to reach for it. If people would learn to change their minds (repent of the way they think and act), the spiritual energy of heaven would flow into them...”<sup>5</sup> We don’t *recognize* that the kingdom of Heaven is here and now, so we don’t open our hearts and minds to receive it and be transformed by it.

“Do not be conformed to this world,” St. Paul writes, “but be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds...” (Romans 12:2, NJB) That’s what Jesus means when he says, “Repent:” be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

And yet, how many of us can honestly say that we are **not** conformed to this world? That we are not suffused with a white, middle class American mindset

and perspective? That we are not *immersed* in a sea of partisan division, which colors *everything* we think or do?

In last week's Adult Forum, we watched a climate scientist give a TED Talk in which she stated that there aren't Democratic or Republican thermometers giving different readings of the earth's temperature. And yet the greatest predictor of how any particular American citizen perceives climate change is what political party they belong to. Somebody in her audience shouted, "You must be a Democrat!" and she responded, "I'm Canadian."<sup>6</sup> She was not either a Democrat or a Republican; she was a scientist, gathering data and noticing trends. But we tend to be conformed to the culture of America today, and in that culture, we seem to see everything – even science – through a partisan lens.

And my friends, if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that there are also *other* ways we are conformed to this world. Some folk come close to giving almost divine status to this nation, or to our flag, or to our Constitution, or to a particular politician. In Jesus' day, the Roman emperor was *indeed* accorded divine status by Roman citizens, and was worshiped. But we never see Jesus paying much attention to the emperor or the mighty Roman Empire or any political entity or ruler. The kingdom of **God** is what is important to Jesus, not the Roman Empire, or Israel, or Judah; and I daresay that Jesus would feel the same way about *today's* nations and rulers, including our own. The kingdom of heaven is the guiding image of Jesus' entire ministry.

Jesus even relativizes two things which, in his day, were the bedrock of one's very identity: namely, one's occupation and the nuclear family! We should be *shocked* when, in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew and James and John and *immediately* they leave their boats, their livelihood, and follow Jesus. James and John even, at Jesus' call, *immediately* leave their father! Now, in Jesus' day, as in our own, a big part of one's identity was wrapped up in one's occupation. But an even **bigger** part of one's identity was wrapped up in one's family of origin – and especially, one's father. A man was identified as, "Simon, son of John" (John 21:15-17), or "Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus" (Mark 10:46). When we read that these fishermen, at Jesus' call, *immediately* leave their occupations *and* their father, we should recognize this as a **radical** realignment of priorities and loyalty and commitment and identity *away* from one's occupation and one's familial identity and *toward* Jesus and the consciousness of the kingdom of heaven. These four fishermen were indeed "repenting:" they were being transformed by the renewing of their minds and hearts and attachments and actions. Oh, they will backslide, to be sure, and will even betray and forsake Jesus when the power of Rome strikes fear in their hearts; but the process of transformation, of repentance, has begun in the calling of these fishermen and their abandoning boats, nets, and father. Jesus' disciples cannot fish for people if they themselves have not first been caught by Jesus.

Fr. John Shea writes: “Jesus invites four particular individuals, two sets of brothers, to [follow] him. They are to enter Jesus' consciousness and learn the change of mind and will that is necessary to receive spiritual energies... These brothers are being called to become conscious of a deeper dimension of life, the *spiritual* sea in which **all** people swim.”<sup>7</sup>

And, my friends, on this Annual Meeting Sunday, let me say that this is what Christ Church, at its best, also does. In almost everything we do: worship, teaching, studying, singing, practicing hospitality, sharing in coffee or a meal, working in ministries both within and outside our parish, praying for each other and our community and our world, learning and practicing ways of praying – in all of these, and more, we open ourselves, and invite others to open themselves, to enter Jesus' consciousness and learn the change of mind and will that is necessary to receive spiritual energies, to receive God's Spirit. We are called to become conscious of a deeper dimension of life – not the sea of worldliness and divisiveness and partisanship and nationalism in which our culture is immersed, but rather the *spiritual* sea in which all people swim – though often unaware. We are called to a transformation of mind and consciousness from the mind and consciousness of the kingdoms of this world and its nations and rulers *into* the mind and consciousness of the kingdom of heaven, which is *here*, and *now*.

AMEN

- 1 Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, “Jesus' Alternative Reality,” Thursday, January 18, 2018 <https://cac.org/jesus-alternative-reality-2018-01-18/>
- 2 Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, “The Realm of God,” Friday, January 26, 2018 <https://cac.org/the-realm-of-god-2018-01-26/>
- 3 Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, “The Kingdom of Heaven,” Tuesday, April 11, 2017 <https://cac.org/the-kingdom-of-heaven-2017-04-11/>
- 4 Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, “A Universal Addiction,” Sunday, December 8, 2019
- 5 John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 64
- 6 Katharine Hayhoe, TEDWomen 2018, “The most important thing you can do to fight climate change: talk about it” [https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine\\_hayhoe\\_the\\_most\\_important\\_thing\\_you\\_can\\_do\\_to\\_fight\\_climate\\_change\\_talk\\_about\\_it](https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine_hayhoe_the_most_important_thing_you_can_do_to_fight_climate_change_talk_about_it)
- 7 Shea, *ibid.*