

Sermon: Follow me
3 Epiphany, Year A
Matthew 4:12-23

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“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.”

Matthew, our Gospel writer of today, writes, “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.” Matthew, echoing the prophet Isaiah’s words more than a thousand years after Isaiah wrote them, is reinterpreting those words as they pertain to Jesus. Jesus has come into the world and Matthew understands him to be the light that is shining in the darkness.

Today many would say that we are in a period of darkness in our nation’s history. For many, but not all, November’s presidential election and its aftermath has been a traumatic event that has caused deep anger, bitterness, frustration, grief and even illness. For others this is a happy time as they were and are pleased with the results of the election.

Friday’s Inauguration brought cheers from many as President Trump took office and it has brought protest from others who are deeply unhappy with this transition. It has been an intense several months if you are watching or reading the news. And most of us have opinions about politics.

But today’s Gospel lesson gives us a wonderful reality check as people of faith in Jesus. Jesus comes upon four fishermen and says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” These four guys, Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John chose to follow Jesus, leaving behind life as they knew it. These were ordinary guys, probably not well educated, probably not all that articulate, and seemingly “just like that” they follow Jesus into the unknown. So much we don’t know and want to ask, “How did Zebedee, who was left, behind feel about that?” My friend Robin put it to me yesterday this way: Imma gonna try one more time to splain to you about Zebedee.

Those boys would NOT leave home and that boat was too dang crowded.

When Jesus came along Z said, “Thank you Jesus! Take these boys right now, take ‘em! And make them into something great!”

And when they left? Old Zebedee leaned back in that boat, propped up his feet, and breathed out a sigh of relief and said, “Free at last! Great God Almighty, I’m free at last!”

So that is one take on the story! I have always had a tendency to worry about poor Zebedee being left behind but maybe we don’t need to worry about him! There is a lot we don’t really know but what we do know is that these brothers became part of the Jesus Movement, a group of followers who devoted themselves to being with Jesus, learning from him and living into his teachings. They were willing to take risks, willing to venture into the unknown, willing to

embark upon a sometimes difficult road. But they were not doing these things on their own; they were with other followers, they had each other and...they had Jesus, to illumine their path.

Last week I saw the movie "Hidden Figures." It is based on the story about three African American women mathematicians coming into their own while working at NASA while the space program is lifting off. During the course of the movie, a famous clip of President John F. Kennedy is shown. Kennedy is talking about the great adventure the space program offers and he says, "We choose to go to the moon and do other things. We do these, not because they are easy, but because they are hard." (Or as he actually says, "because they ah hod!") (1962)

I wonder if these early disciples knew how hard their road would be. AND I wonder if they knew how exhilarating their life with Jesus would also be. Jesus is the light that has dawned. The people who had sat in darkness were seeing this great light, this light of Jesus. I imagine they had their doubts about leaving their former life behind, maybe felt guilty leaving poor dad Zebedee to tend to the fishing. They were destined for greatness, not the worldly greatness that comes with fortune or fame, with big bank accounts or with prestige or popularity. They were destined for the greatness that comes with following Jesus – greatness in loving all kinds of people, greatness in being just and merciful, greatness in lifting up the poor and feeding the hungry, greatness in healing the sick.

Matthew's audience must have been experiencing their own darkness in order for these words to have made any sense to them. As followers of Jesus, they were likely experiencing persecution from the Roman government. But they followed Jesus anyway. His invitation compelled them. They followed Jesus and became part of the Jesus Movement *not because it was easy but because it was hard and because Jesus was with them!* (To add to Kennedy's quote)

God calls us and never stops calling us to follow him. And where he was calling us in a particular way last year or even last week, he is calling you and me to something new and different today and we are to discern what that invitation is. As people of the way of Jesus, we are called to bear light in the dark corners of the world, in our own neighborhoods and sometimes beyond. The call of God takes us beyond the limits of our own power, beyond the limits of our perceptions of ourselves. If you find yourself thinking or saying, "Well I couldn't possibly do that, or say that" when you think God may be nudging you, think again.

Where are you experiencing darkness today? Maybe it's in our political situation but maybe it's in something very different, perhaps in a broken relationship with someone, or you are paralyzed in taking a step toward your own healing. How can you let God's light shine through you to cast out darkness? For some it was getting on a bus to be part of the Women's March on Washington yesterday, vocalizing a desire that all people will experience peace and justice. For others it might be giving over to God in a deep internal way some area of life that has caused them pain. When we follow Jesus, we won't always get it right but we are compelled in these times to live into our baptismal covenant, those promises we made at our baptism and that we renew anytime someone is baptized. No, we won't always get it right but we must try. These words remind us how to follow Jesus. Please turn to the bottom of p.303 in the BCP and let's go over these promises together:

Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and , whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People I will, with God's help

The answers are, "I will with what?" With God's help!

When Jesus says, Follow me, this is what he is talking about. Living the Christian life, not living the Democratic life, not living the Republican life, not even living the American life, but living the Christian life; putting God first, *before* any politician, any President, any legislator, any priest, any person. To follow Jesus is to dive deep into what it means to be part of the Jesus Movement.

So, however you voted (or didn't) in November, what are you going to do NOW to be part of the Jesus movement, what are you going to do now to bring light to dark parts of the world? Where in your own life are you inspired to do something not because it is easy but because it is hard? Jesus is with you. And with Jesus at our side, just like those early fishermen, we can do that hard stuff!