

Epiphany 3 A  
Matthew 4:12-23  
January 22, 2023

*“Living in the Light”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, 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 lake—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.*

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A wise woman once told her daughter that, “If you cook a man a fish you only feed him for a day. But if you teach a man to fish then you get rid of him for the whole weekend.”<sup>1</sup> As I’ve told you before, I like to fish. I’m not good at it, but I enjoy it. It’s the first thing our nieces and nephew say they want to do when they visit. Last summer, I hobbled out to the dock after knee surgery and the girls could not have been more delighted by the assortment of 2 and 3-inch sunfish they caught under my tutelage!

There are *real* fishers in our story from Matthew’s gospel. In fact, there’s a lot going on in our story from Matthew’s gospel! First, we learn that John the Baptist has been arrested and Jesus has withdrawn to a backwater part of Roman-occupied Israel called Galilee. It’s there that he begins his public ministry. “Repent,” he says, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Then, walking by the sea, he calls four fishermen to follow him and become fishers for people. Finally, Jesus and his little band begin making the rounds: teaching, proclaiming the good news, and healing the sickness and disease of the people.

Honestly, though, the thing that sticks out to me most isn’t John’s arrest or Jesus’ move to Capernaum; it’s not the tour of teaching, preaching, and healing. What strikes me most is that an itinerant rabbi like Jesus singles out four random guys with fishing poles, invites them to follow him, and they actually do – on the spot, no holds barred. All in. Wouldn’t Jesus have wanted to be more discerning, seen resumes, run a background check, at least had a conversation with the candidates before choosing his disciples?

When we were doing our search for Paul, our choir director, the choir spent hours thinking about the kind of leader they needed; a committee carefully crafted a job description, reviewed resumes, and conducted

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<sup>1</sup> Raz. “Mother to Daughter Advice,” Becausemomsays.com, May 8, 2021: <https://becausemomsays.com/fishing-jokes/>.

initial interviews. When they'd finished, there was another round of interviews, a trial rehearsal, and a vote before we called Paul and invited him to join our staff here at New England Church. We needed to *know* that he was the right guy for the job. Not Jesus though – apparently any old fisherman would do.

Then again, shouldn't these fishermen have learned a bit more about the potential job, sold their boats, and seen to their families' needs? I can tell you, when conversations began between myself and the ministerial search committee here at New England Church, I read everything about you that I could find! I scoured your website, your profile, financials, your membership data and neighborhood data. I asked questions of conference and association staff, the search committee, and of you, the congregation, during myriad Zoom interviews and phone calls. I checked out the church and the community and the city. And then, when a decision had been made, it took more than three months to prepare to relocate from Wisconsin and begin a new chapter here with you. Not these four fishermen though – a previously unknown guy shows up with a penchant to preach and a compelling one-liner about repentance and the kingdom of heaven and they were ready to go – nets dropped, boats left, fathers and families left in a stupor.

What were Jesus and these fishermen thinking? This is not how things work! I guess that's the genius and the curse of the sparse and subtle writing of our gospel authors. They tell us just enough to ask questions – just enough to want more – and then they leave us still searching.

Matthew's author sums up this part of their tale simply by telling us that they traveled throughout Galilee, teaching, and preaching, and healing, and gaining fame in the region as they did. Then, it's on to the celebrated Sermon on the Mount. We're left reeling and asking ourselves: what just happened here? But Matthew doesn't take time to tell us more.

The chapter already ended, the story moved on, and we need to reorient ourselves, realign ourselves, and move on with it.

That's basically what Jesus invites his hearers to do, from the very first words of his public ministry. He says, "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Despite images of gravelling penitents, evangelical altar calls, and prayerful confessions, the Greek word *metanoeo*, translated here as "repent," means turn around. Jesus' proclamation, the core of his message according to Matthew, is the call to repentance – reorientation and realignment in light of the inbreaking of heaven on earth.

I suspect, with all that's going on in the world, it might be hard to convince folks that heaven is breaking into the hear-and-now. A quick look at the news reveals more bickering about the debt ceiling, more fighting in Ukraine, more protests around the world, more celebrity gossip. In Jesus' day, the news wasn't any better: more taxes, more restrictions, more of Rome and less of everything else. Jesus' message about heaven's realm was a hard sell then too. And yet, four random fishermen and crowds of hopeful villagers apparently thronged to Jesus and his hard-sell message: they reoriented, realigned, and moved on in the guiding light of heaven's realm.

With all that's going on in the world, I wonder how often we miss the hopeful signs of light playing at the edges of our vision. I wonder how often the little signs of hope, the glimpses of wholeness, the promise and possibility of a better tomorrow, simply never register in our brains because we don't or we can't filter out all the rest. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus started with the proclamation of heaven's realm, but he followed it up with teaching, healing, and serving to show heaven's realm breaking through. Jesus isn't doing that for us, at least not in the same way, but the invitation is still the same: "Repent, reorient, realign in the light of the inbreaking of heaven on earth." In his song "Anthem," Musician Leonard Cohen reminds us that, "There is a crack in everything, that's how the

light gets in.” It’s always easier to see the bad stuff, but that doesn’t mean the good stuff, the light, isn’t there. Jesus invites us to see it – to see the signs of hope and wholeness and possibility – and reorient ourselves, realign ourselves to living in light of that instead.

And that’s the invitation to *the* church, to *our* church as well. We’re invited to see where the light is breaking in – in our neighborhood, and our city – and to reorient and realign and join the light, illuminating our world.

It’s always easier to see the bad and let it cast a pall over our eyes and over our lives. Jesus knew that, but he invites us to turn and see where the light is breaking in. This week, that’s my invitation to you too. Be mindful, be intentional, and look for those little signs of hope, the glimpses of wholeness and promise and possibility. Look for the light breaking through the cracks, at the edges of our vision. Register these experiences in your hearts and minds and be grateful for them. Notice the light so that we can reorient and realign and shine, for the sake of our world. Amen.