

Matthew 4:12-23; RIC Sunday; January 28, 2024
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Grace to you and peace from God our parent, Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Living in a world where politicians want more and more power. Minorities are treated as “others” and are not safe. Children aren’t valued. The hungry are told to fend for themselves. Being judged by where you were born or grew up. Being condemned if you aren’t the right religion. Dangerous to hang out with the “wrong crowd.” Religious people who seek more power and control. A world where people cry “O God, How Long?!”

Before we look more at that world - let’s take a look at our readings for today.

First, the people of Zebulun and Naphtali receive a message of promise and hope from the prophet Isaiah. A promise that God will provide a glorious future. To learn more about this promise, if we read a bit further in chapter 9 of Isaiah, we find a familiar text starting at verse 6: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” This isn’t just a message of promise and hope for the people of Zebulun and Naphtali, but for us as well.

Our psalm today is considered a Trust Psalm. There are different types of psalms, like songs of thanksgiving, hymns of praise, prayers for help, and trust psalms. The Lutheran Study Bible says that the “trust psalms express faith and confidence in God amid great difficulties, threats, and dangers.” (Lutheran Study Bible, page 776) The psalm is a story of the psalmist expressing desires to God and knowing that God will deliver on the promises.

So far we’ve had a message of hope and promise, and then a reminder to trust in God. I don’t know about you, but these are certainly messages I need to be reminded of on a daily basis.

Today’s new testament reading was picked specifically to tie in with today’s RIC Sunday’s theme of “Celebrating Diversity as God’s Children.” Once a year we celebrate RIC Sunday to remind ourselves of the public promise and commitment we’ve made as a congregation through our public welcome statement. Just like God constantly reminds us of God’s love, we need to be constantly reminded of our commitment to our LGBTQIA+ siblings, our black and brown siblings, people of every age, marital status, neurodivergent status, political leanings, and people of all abilities. It can be easy to get into a routine and forget about the work we do as a congregation of being radically welcoming and inclusive. I remember back to our Diversity Sunday service when we received official recognition as an RIC congregation. It was so wonderful to see everyone celebrating what makes them unique as a diverse child of God. To be featured

as the lead story on the 6 o'clock news and, based on the comments on Facebook, see people get riled up about our radical message of inclusive love. So, in case you haven't heard it today or in a while, here is your reminder. You, yes you, are a vital part of God's diversity - you are a beloved child of God - exactly as you are. You don't need to change to receive God's love - God loves you unconditionally. Through this love you will find yourself changing in ways that bring you closer to the fullness of God's vision for us and the cosmos - the vision of radical and inclusive love. While we may feel lost in the world and not seen as important - remember that God sees us and we will see God's glory revealed.

When I read today's Gospel, I started thinking about how this is the launching point of Jesus' ministry. If the Gospel was a TV show like the shows that had theme songs and images that basically set the scene for the entire series - a quick montage of how it all began, I think this would be the imagery that would be used for the TV show of Jesus. Of course, the TV show "Jesus" would be the much more successful spin off of the prior series "John: Locust Eater".

There are two parts of today's Gospel that I want to focus on. The first is the phrase "fishers of people". A phrase that many of us are familiar with and have heard many times - but have you thought about what it really means? Putting a cookie at the end of a fishing line in hopes that someone will eat it and then you can reel them in? This may be an interesting way to try to bring people to the church, but probably not very

effective. When Jesus called his disciples, they weren't people out fishing as a hobby and catching a few fish for themselves or their family, no, they were in the business of fishing, bringing in large quantities of fish. To do this they used nets. When they used nets, they weren't selective in what fish ended up in the net - no, it collected a wide range of fish.

The Lutheran Study Bible shares this comment about this passage: "This odd metaphor plays on the notion of a net collecting different types of fish. These disciples will become founders of a church that 'catches' people of all sorts (that is, attracts people who are diverse with regard to nationality, ethnicity, and social class.)" (*Lutheran Study Bible*, p. 1526) Sound familiar? It should - it is very similar to our welcome statement about who we welcome, or hope to "catch" with our work as a congregation. We don't want to selectively share the message of God's love to only certain select people - no - we want to share that message with the world as we celebrate the diversity of God's children. This is where the phrase "cast a wide net" comes from - the wider your net, the more fish, or people, you can "catch" or reach to share God's message with.

Speaking of sharing God's message, the next part of the Gospel I want to look at is verse 23, where it states that "Jesus went throughout all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news." The "good news" or looking at the Greek - "gospel". So often we hear "preach the Gospel" or "share the Gospel". After all we are part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America - Evangelical meaning to share

the Gospel or the good news. I don't know about you - but often when I think about sharing the gospel, I think about sharing the story **OF** Jesus - about his birth, death, and resurrection. However, here we have Jesus starting to proclaim the gospel, the good news. Now certainly Jesus made references to his birth, death, and eventual resurrection, but that wasn't the core of his teachings. No, Jesus mainly preached the good news of God's inclusive, radical, and counter-cultural love and belonging. That is the heart of the gospel, the message Jesus brought, not about Jesus himself.

So, back to the world I described at the beginning. A world that sounds pretty bleak and depressing. A world that might be struggling and losing hope. A world with downtrodden that are struggling against the government, or as Pastor Megan referred to it last week, the empire. Is this world I describe the world of today? Is it the world at Jesus' time? Yes. And just like back then, we too continue to need the message of Good News that Jesus brings. A message that runs against the norms, a message that brings a unique perspective to the world, a message that provides a promise - a message I know I'm longing to hear and need to hear these days - yes, Jesus' message brings A New Hope.

After events of the past week and yesterday, it can be hard to want to hear a message of hope. I know it isn't easy preaching about hope and good news amidst what is going on in our world, in our country, in Minneapolis and Minnesota. So be assured, that while I'm preaching on the message of hope - that doesn't mean that feelings of anger, fear, despair, and sadness aren't valid - those are valid and know that God is with you in all

your feelings. Also know that the message of hope is there as well - just as the message ran counter cultural during Jesus' time - it does now as well.

Back on Christ the King Sunday in November, the service spoke to me and I immediately knew I had to include part of it in my sermon today, as it summarized the message of Christ very well. This was the Sunday when we were taken on a tour of the church calendar, exploring each of the seasons of the church year. We are currently in the Time after Epiphany. Here is part of what was shared about Epiphany and the time after.

In Epiphany, we look to that ancient star, and we see that the message of God's love knows no bounds: it is a message for people of every color and every tongue, every race and every nation.

In the time after Epiphany, we remember that because of Jesus, the divisions that you and I create in our lives will someday be erased by God, who comes to make us all one. Love has come to let us know that there is no such thing as a people from the east or west or north or south. There are only people of God, all created by God, all loved by God, all within the realm of God's redemption through Jesus Christ.

The light of the star brought the sages to Jesus, and Jesus is the light that brings God's love to all - to the poor, the lame, the sick, the hurting, the sorrowful, the outcast, those rejected by the world - even to you, in your own joy and sadness, goodness and brokenness, hope and challenges.

That is Epiphany. It is the fulfillment of God's love-filled promise extended beyond all human boundaries. It is the light of God that breaks down walls and unites the human family.

So, like Jesus, we are called to proclaim this Good News. Part of that Good News is that preaching the message from a pulpit isn't the only way to share the Good News. Just as Pastor Megan has shared, and based on what the Bible says, we are all called in our own diverse ways, based on our own diverse skills, to share the Good News in wide diverse ways. Simply being an RIC congregation is a way we show God's radical love - by emphatically stating that God's love belongs to all, to everyone, especially those that society wants to call "other" or "less than". You help proclaim the Gospel by simply being here - as part of a church that proudly proclaims to our queer siblings, our black and brown siblings, and anyone that society calls "others", that God loves them and they are part of the beautiful diversity of God's children. Some of the other ways we declare God's love include filling the micro pantries every day - where people have access to what they need - with no questions asked, no tests to pass - just God's love through food and personal care items. And it isn't just the people who actually put the items in the pantries, but everyone who buys or donates the items, those who package oatmeal to be ready to go out, those who coordinate it all. Everyone who works with the young men in the parish house - you are proclaiming God's good news through your actions. Donating items or money to support them, driving them to where they need to go, providing connections in the community so they can get jobs, praying for them - all

are part of being a proclaimer of the good news. When society might want to call them less than or unwanted - we, at Faith, proudly say that they are welcome and are loved by God and are part of the wonderful diversity of God's children.

There are so many ways we all partake in proclaiming the gospel - whether you do it through music, through education, through a hug or a meal to someone who is struggling, through just checking in with people to see if they are OK. So while often, we hear of people doing more noticeable or newsworthy things like being part of a large protest in Minneapolis, skipping school or work, or being clergy that go and take action to bring awareness and end up getting arrested for civil disobedience; we have to remember that all ways that proclaim the radical message of God's all inclusive love and redemption to all people, the message of A New Hope, are not only valid, but much needed in this world that is struggling.

So while "we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed" (1 John 3:2) we strive to continue to live into the message of hope and promise. We work together, as God's wonderfully diverse children, to proclaim the message that Christ shared, until we can all revel in the fullness of God's love revealed to us. Until then, we work together, as fishers of people, to cast a very wide net to proclaim and live into God's radical message of all-inclusive love and redemption for all people.

We do all this through the freedom given to us by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Since God has declared that we are fully loved and included and nothing we can do can separate us from the love of God, we can boldly be proclaimers of Christ. We must always remember that when the Empire gets us down, we need to cling to the message of A New Hope, and even when the Empire strikes back because of our radical message of inclusion for the entirety of the diversity of God's Children, that in the end, we can rely on The Return of the Jesus to carry us through. Amen.