

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I talked last week in my sermon about what the church does, particularly in the context of what we are called to do – as church – in times like these. Things have not calmed down this week, and yesterday morning there was another fatal shooting of an American citizen by a federal officer in Minneapolis. This one hit particularly close to home for Helen and me, as the man who was killed was an ICU nurse in his 30s. As many of you know, our son James, who is also in his 30s, is an ER nurse, who just began a new job as a rapid response nurse and has been working in the ICU all week. This week in the ELCA clergy Facebook group there again is urgency about the need to speak out, to do something, or at least not to do nothing. I expect that there are similar conversations happening in your circles, similar frustration, similar fear about where things might be heading.

Today's Gospel reading is about when Jesus finally started to do something, after his baptism by John in the Jordan river, and his temptation by the devil in the wilderness. Jesus' activity is being triggered by John's arrest and imprisonment. But Jesus' response not to head to the prison to free John, and I wonder if there weren't people around Jesus urging him to do just that. No, when he learns of John's arrest, he withdraws back up north to where he grew up, and goes and makes his home up in Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee. Matthew reminds us that this area now known as Galilee was previously the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. What's important to know about them, aside from the fact that they were two of the 10 northern tribes of Israel, is that they were the two territories on the front lines when Assyria conquered Israel in 723 BCE, kind of like Donetsk and Luhansk are on the frontlines of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They bore the brunt of Assyria's conquest: the cream of their population was deported, their economy broken, and many non-Israelites settled in the area after that, which is why it came to be called Galilee of the Gentiles. And this is also why Jesus and his disciples are suspect when they are down south in Judea. Galilean Jews, you see, might not be ethnically pure. And on top of that, Jesus' disciples do not come from the cream of the Galilean population. They are fishermen to begin with, whose livelihood is regulated and taxed by the powers that be, and is vulnerable to policy changes that suddenly limit their markets or raise the tolls they have to pay. Think of soybean farmers in our area, whose markets disappeared overnight last year.

I give you all of this context so that you can see that where Jesus chooses to begin his ministry is significant. He goes not to the heart of power to challenge it directly, and not to the wilderness like John, where revolutionary movements traditionally hide out. He goes instead to the borderlands where life is complicated and messy, and to the villages where people live, and to their synagogues where they worship. And we learn in the next part of this chapter, which I'll talk about more next week, that his fame spread into foreign territory to the north. Make a mental note of this beginning, because it is also where Jesus ends his earthly ministry, and which Matthew emphasizes in the final verses of his Gospel as Jesus sends his disciples out to make more disciples in all the nations of the world. This is the first thing I want you to notice in this text today. The kingdom of heaven that Jesus proclaims is not about making Israel great again. He goes to the territories most devastated by Israel's national ambition, and he goes not with a message of resentment about past grievances, or about taking back what was theirs, or about fearing the foreigners in their midst. He goes with a message of light in the darkness, a message that God has not forgotten about them, that God is with them, Emmanuel in Jesus, and that God's kingdom is imminent.

But Jesus also comes with a message of repentance, and that is the second thing I want you to notice in this text. I want you to notice that when John the Baptist is silenced, arrested and imprisoned, Jesus is not silenced. The first thing out of his mouth is “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” And I want you to notice that those are the exact words that John the Baptist spoke, and that that is no mere coincidence. Matthew is making a point here. He is telling us first that the world as it is is not the world as God intended it to be. The powers that be do not have God’s imprimatur. They do not have *cart blanche* to rule as they see fit. Repentance is called for, and that is non-negotiable. Repentance means a change of mind, a change in attitude, and a resulting change in one’s ways. We’ll see next week in the Beatitudes, at the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, how Jesus begins to affect that kind of repentance in his disciples.

Matthew is also telling us that that call for repentance is not going away. John may be silenced (and we know what the future holds for John), but his message will not and cannot be silenced. We also know that the powers that be will deal with Jesus the same way that they did with John. Jesus too will be executed for this message of the kingdom. But that will not silence him or his message, because death will not be the final word for Jesus. God’s kingdom is coming, it is already near, and repentance is still on the table, to be proclaimed, embodied, and practiced – lived out in daily life.

And that leads us to the third and final thing to notice in this text today. It ends with Jesus calling his disciples, ordinary people with ordinary, complicated lives lived in ordinary complicated and messy circumstances, whom Jesus will entrust to carry his enduring message to all the world. That’s skipping ahead to the end of the Gospel, I know, but here is where it starts. And you and I today need to know how the Gospel ends, because it continues with us and is our reality today. We are the ones now out in the nations of the world, baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection, raised to new life in his body the church, who now bear his message that will not be silenced. This is what we say in the face of the alarming events of recent days and months. We say, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Repent of the devilish promises that resentment, greed, and selfishness are good, that what we want is what we need. Repent of powers of this world that rebel against God, that trust in violence and death to achieve their goals. Repent of the ways of sin that draw you from God, that curve you in on yourself and away from your neighbor, especially your neighbor in need. That’s what we say.

And that is what we do. Because the message we proclaim is the message we also need to hear. Repentance has to begin with us, because like it or not we remain enmeshed in the sin that is still trying to hold the world in its grip, sin that is in denial about its defeat on the cross and its ultimate demise. So, we bear the message of repentance with humility, acknowledging that we are part of the problem. But we also bear it confidently, trusting that sin is a dead end, in spite of all its illusory power. And we bear it hopefully, trusting that Jesus has opened for us a way through sin and death to resurrection life, and that by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit that life begins now, and we have what we need to follow him in the way of his life-giving cross.

May we continue, by God’s grace, to trust these promises, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus especially in these difficult times. Amen