

Matthew 4:12-25: First Days

Introduction:

As we continue to walk through Matthew, we're going to see Jesus' first days out living as the Messiah he is, what they look like, what he does with himself. It's a straightforward passage, one we may have heard before, but I think there's a lot that we can discover in it that's new, even though much of it will certainly be things we've heard before.

So we'll review the passage that was read to us, I'll try to lift up for deeper examination a few, oh, themes, things, that we see here, and we'll talk about the ways this might have relevance in our lives. Let's pray God makes the most of this time for us.

Prayer:

vv12-14: The Set-Up

Foreshadowing is happening here. John is in prison; we're hearing it now, but Jesus already did. He's maybe returned from his time of tempting, restored to strength after angels have waited on him, and he's come back to the banks of the Jordan from out in the wilderness and hears, from those who follow John, what has happened. So he continues on, crossing the Jordan into Israel and taking the long journey walking a couple of weeks north and just a few days west from the top of the Dead Sea back home to Nazareth. He

doesn't have to go back home, but he does; maybe it's here where he tells his family what he's about to do, hugs his mother, and then, after some time, heads northeast, downhill to the very northern part of the Sea of Galilee, where the village of Capernaum is.

Capernaum becomes a place Jesus returns to again and again in Matthew, although he's not always well received. Capernaum was a town right on the sea of Galilee--it was a fishing village, a port town, a couple of hundred years old by the time Jesus visits, and never occupied by the Romans the way many of Israel's towns were. You didn't live there if you didn't like smelling like fish. (And, frankly, being a fisherman left you unclean. A little salty) This was a city far from the center of things, really uninteresting and not that influential in the wider political world.

Most of Jesus' first disciples, the apostles, call it home.

“in order to fulfill”

Matthew does what he always does. He says that what Jesus was doing here was a fulfillment, a realization or affirmation, of some scriptural passage that came long ago.

First he tells us that Capernaum was “in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali,” these were, along with Asher, were the northernmost tribes in Ancient Israel, long, long before Jesus taken captive by Assyria and never

returned to their original territory. In Ancient Israel, Galilee was a name given to an area of Israel, a region, that included parts of these tribal regions. It was a term, like the “midwest” that included distinct, boundaries areas, like the midwest does: “Ohio” and “Indiana.” Not Kansas, despite my in-laws sincere beliefs.

By the time the Romans come around, though, Galilee isn’t a regional term, it’s a distinct area, the northernmost district of Israel. You’d go south from Galilee down through the district of Samaria into the district of Judea.

Matthew quotes a passage that Jesus is said to fulfill, and he’s quoting from a time when Galilee was the region up north, not a distinct area. It’s a region that, during Isaiah’s time, has a lot of non-Israelites, Gentiles, living in it. He writes:

***15 “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
16 the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of
death
a light has dawned.”[f]***

This is a powerful passage in its original context. Isaiah

is calling this area “the land of the shadow of death,” because of course, the great threat to Israel-- ultimately proven in the exile of almost all the tribes-- is Assyria, to their north. They are the “death” that’s casting its shadow over the northern part of Israel. The people there are in the darkness of this shadow. And in the original context, this passage was a promise that even though Assyria would come, there would come a day when this would be undone, when God would come through for the tribes who were overrun, largely exiled and killed. In fact, if we kept reading in Isaiah 9, we’d recognize what we’d hear:

***3 You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;***

they rejoice before you

as people rejoice at the harvest,

as warriors rejoice

when dividing the plunder.

4 For as in the day of Midian’s defeat,

you have shattered

the yoke that burdens them,

the bar across their shoulders,

the rod of their oppressor.

5 Every warrior’s boot used in battle

and every garment rolled in blood

will be destined for burning,

will be fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given,

***and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.***

This Isaiah 9 passage that Matthew quotes just the first couple of verses from was a huge promise to Israel that many of them were waiting for God to make good on, because it had been hundreds and hundreds of years since “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles” had been decimated. For Matthew, for other gospel authors, for the early Church, they understood this promise as coming true in Jesus. I don't think Matthew can help but bring this up, here, and point out that Jesus is fulfilling it by making his base of operations in Capernaum.

So this is a powerful passage of hope in its original context, and it's brought up here, now, because Matthew, the early Church, we today, believe that God

ultimately fulfilled this promise in a way no one would have expected, extending the hope out from this tiny region into all creation, and through Israelites into all people. But the basic link that let's Matthew bring this up is just that Jesus is in the area that Isaiah was writing about. That's the "real" link.

But we who are reading Matthew's gospel, Matthew expects us to have this in play. He expects us to know these hopes for the Messiah, and so, when, right after letting us know that this "light has dawned" in Jesus, the one who wears kingship, authority, dominion like a mantle, a cloak, it's on his shoulders, right after quoting this passage that we have learned by heart, we read:

17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

This is powerful! This is the part of the movie where the soundtrack soars, and there's a big camera pan around the hero, and you feel inspired and get goosebumps despite yourself, you know? You can't help it.

Jesus is declaring what we've been waiting for since Isaiah promised it. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Kingdom of Heaven:

Let's talk about "Kingdom of Heaven" for a second, just, you know, as a *phrase*.

We Americans Understand "law" as a body of things that we should conform to for the greater good; in a kingdom, the law isn't a "body of codes"--it's a body, a person--one ruler, making all the rules.

The law is a will of one being, one person in power, and what he or she says goes—this person's the boss of you...and your parents, and your siblings, and everybody.

But the english word "kingdom" isn't really the best way to translate the greek word that stands behind what Jesus says here, which is "basilea"

We hear "kingdom" and we think "place"--a kingdom is a place, where there is a king. This makes sense. (the king's dom, I guess). But the word "basilea" in Greek emphasizes not the place, but (slow) primarily the activity of the one who is king. The king's activity, namely, the king's capability, and right to rule over others.

And Jesus says this is at hand, this right and capability of God to express his will and his purpose and his goals is at hand. "The Kingdom of Heaven" is at hand. Matthew does what no other Gospel author, no other New Testament author does, which is to talk about

“The kingdom of heaven” rather than the use the more common term “kingdom of God.” They are basically synonyms.

I actually think that the “Kingdom of Heaven” is a little more accessible, because whatever else we think when we hear “heaven,” we think of some place where God is in charge. Some unseen, spiritual realm. And that can be a lead in to the concept of God being in charge all around us, maybe. As we pray, “Let your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,” we’re praying that God’s capacity and right to express his will and his purpose and his goals be entirely established in the world, clearly, objectively. We wait for Jesus’ return to fully make this happen; but his death and resurrection and the Holy Spirit being given to the Church launched it.

God worked through Israel, and then through Jesus to make this kingdom known throughout the world. Even even those outside Israel can be a part of it. And Jesus is the lynchpin on which everything rests for the Christian; without him there is no declaration of the kingdom, there is no one faithful to God's covenant, there is no Spirit given for us to live empowered and obedient lives before God, there is no resurrection, and no end of sin or death or the devil's power of us. But Jesus did live; and does live, and so the good news of God's Kingdom still stands, pushing us from the past, from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, and pulling

us from the future, when all we'll know is God's reign throughout the world.

And of course, given the news that this is starting, that the “Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” you turn away from what you were doing and how you were living. If you’re living one way of life, a lifestyle that is out of whack with the new world around you, and the God who is on the move reclaiming it, you have to change your life. That’s all repentance is, a conversion, a turning away from one set of habits, and taking on another.

This is what Jesus is saying as he goes around Capernaum, 1500 people strong, and walking along what we call the Sea of Galilee.

As he goes, he sees a couple of brothers, Simon and Andrew, fishing. He says, “come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.” They leave their nets and follow him. He keep walking, and sees a couple of other brothers, Zebedee’s sons, John and James. All three are in their boat, prepping for a run. Jesus calls them, and the brothers hope out and follow him, too, leaving dad behind to take care of the nets.

There’s something a little pied-piper-ish about this, you know? And that’s the way we read it, Jesus just whistling along, and people just dropping everything and following him. And that’s fine; it’s what happens.

But we also should remember that Matthew never implies this is Jesus' first day out at Capernaum. He implies instead that Jesus has been around for some period of time, talking about what he says.

Now, Jesus invites them to follow him, right? And Simon and Andrew do, and assumedly he calls the same thing out to the Zebedee boys, and they follow him, too. And we can read follow here in its most basic sense, a sort of "follow behind," a "make way for ducklings" thing, where Jesus is at the lead and they're right behind him. That's the image Mathew gives us, here.

But really, before Jesus is off the shore, we leave this image of following along behind, behind.

The word Matthew uses, and he uses it here for the first time, is a word that means, well, it has all the meaning that we usually stuff into it and probably more. It means to take on the teachings, the attitudes, the character, the beliefs of the person that you follow. It goes beyond this, though, to imply the breaking of social ties, and their reorienting around the one you follow. In this case, the Messiah, Jesus. And it is a Jesus word. It's a Gospel word. It's a Christian word. When we talk about following Jesus, this is the sort of "following" we're talking about. Simon called Peter, we know from this point on, he'll go where Jesus goes, try to do what Jesus does, become like Jesus as much as

he can. And he'll fail along the way, and he'll be rash even after the Holy Spirit comes upon him; eventually, he'll die for following Jesus. Andrew, Zebedee's boys, they take on Jesus' course of life.

Leaving Their Nets:

And we should let the Simon and Andrew's "leaving their nets," let the Zebedee boys "leaving their father and their boat" just be what it is, nothing more or less.

We read these things, and because of other gospels and because of what we know about how their story turns out, what we picture in our heads are these swarthy guys, hardcore fisherman, just leaving all livelihood, all roots, all relationships and trundling along behind Jesus for a few years. But this isn't totally accurate. We know that Jesus uses Peter's house as a base of operations; it's likely Peter was married, as Jesus healed his mother-in-law, and probably stayed that way. Over and over in Matthew we see Jesus returning to Capernaum; I doubt the disciples avoided family when they came back around.

They'll end up, really, leaving behind everything-- everything--to follow Jesus to their deaths. Their lives will be changed entirely because of it. But that's not what we see right now. Right now, they're leaving things out, leaving a dad to finish the work. I know some people who would be more comfortable, see it as morally purer to really leave everything in your

whole life behind you than it would be to leave your tools dirty and in the yard, so I don't want us to discount the boats full of nets that need fixes, the fish that Simon and Andrew may have already hauled in, the dad who has to fix all the knots by himself.

And while it's utterly true that following Jesus is costly, costs things we wouldn't have imagined and more of them than we'd like, and that Matthew will again and again show us just how much following Jesus in this discipleship way costs us, let's allow what we see here to just loosen us up a little bit. Because what we see here is a responsiveness to Jesus that embraces leaving some things undone and unfinished and unprepared, skipping work responsibilities, taking a relationship for granted for awhile, and trusting that it'll survive it. I hope that we do similar things when it is clear that God is asking us to follow him. I hope that we can interrupt our plans, our work, our schedule, our intentions and expectations to responsively do what needs done in front of us.

Do we see this? They aren't signing up for death here, in this moment; they'll come to that place. They may be intrigued by the idea of "catching people," may have some longing in their hearts to do something big, something meaningful in the world. But right now, they aren't signing up for death. They are, though, being awfully flexible and responsive, and the truth is that these two virtues, flexibility and responsiveness,

they are really, really hard to have in our over-scheduled, over-indebted, over-leveraged lives.

When we discover, in the middle of our days--our work especially--Jesus inviting us to have influence, to follow him over to here or there, to do this or that for him, I wonder what it takes for us to act with responsive flexibility the way these fisherman do?

Ending:

Today's passage ends on this:

23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. 24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. 25 Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis,[g] Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

I want to save our discussion of this until a few chapters later in Matthew, but let me just point out now: This is what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like when it shows up in our world. And this really is "good news" for people, right? Teaching about God, what it means to really live for who God really is, healing of

everything that can go wrong with a person. These things--revealing who God is, healing people, and letting them know that God is making good on his promises--these things are good news for people, news so good that they are worth turning our lives around when we hear about it.

And next week we'll begin to see what Jesus has to say to these large crowds that have come to follow him, some of whom will do more than follow alongside him for awhile, but follow him in that real, disciple, "all in" way that we talked about a few minutes ago.

Saying Things:

So what can we say about today's passage?

Saying Things: Missions & Metaphors

These guys get a mission from God, right? "From now on you'll catch people."

Jesus invites them into a mission, a purpose, that they respond to even though they can't fully understand what it means right now.

And whatever it is we are doing when God calls us can become the metaphor for what we can do for God. Does this make sense? Whatever it is we are doing when God calls us can become the metaphor for what we can do.

Remember, Jesus takes these fisherman and says “from now on you’ll fish for people.” This is a powerful metaphor, right? We put this metaphor on our bumper stickers and calendars. We take it on as our own--and nothing’s wrong with that, but few of us have fished like this, from boats with nets, every single night except Friday, every day but Saturday, while all our friends sleep, and our kids grow up, and our fingers crack and we stink of fish, all the time.

Jesus doesn’t explain the metaphor to them, doesn’t say, “from now on you will fish for people, by which I mean that you’ll be...whatever” And we’ve probably all been told at one point or another what Jesus “really” means by this: that he’s talking about evangelism, that they’ll take part in bringing people into God’s Kingdom.

If we were to spend the rest of the morning trying to figure out “what our ‘net’ is” when it comes to how we should “fish for people,” we’d completely miss how personal and powerful and inspiring this was for these guys who spent all their nights fishing, and their days mostly asleep. Jesus promised them success in the human arena, success with people, all for God’s purposes and ends. He promised them meaningful work.

And Jesus promises us, who depend on his Spirit, the exact same thing. The question that we each have to

answer is how what we do with ourselves can become a metaphor for living for God? Where in our work is there room for metaphors that are inspiring? Fishing for people can inspire fisherman; but most of us aren't going fishing for our livelihood. Teaching, Counseling, the helping fields, they may be easy places to find meaning and we may not even need metaphors to inspire us; but there are all sorts of jobs many of us do that we have to connect, somehow, to the great callings all Christians have to reveal God's Kingdom in the world. This is especially true for those of us who don't directly help people all day long.

And for those of us who have retired or are nearing it, what metaphor matters now? Jesus' metaphor here is one based on the work they are doing; what happens when our employment is no longer something that our life centers around? Is there anyway Jesus can say to us, "From now on you'll be retired for people?" What does that mean when retirement is supposed to be, really, for us, some rest after a long period of employment?

For all of us, though, this kingdom business that Jesus is doing--again, teaching people about what's really true about God, healing them in practical ways, telling them about the way God is making good on His promises--this kingdom business that Jesus is doing is what his disciples, we who follow him, are called to do, whether we're working for ourselves, for someone

else, or not at all.

Saying Things: Flexible Responsiveness

And whatever we do with ourselves, we rarely want to be interrupted while we're doing it. We rarely find ourselves flexible and responsive to anyone, much less to God who often doesn't walk up and say "follow me" as much as speaks to us in a Spirit-given whisper, pricks our conscience or our hearts.

We know following Jesus is costly, in great ways, but one of the greatest ways we faithfully live out our calling as Christians who reveal God's Kingdom to the world is to daily interrupt our plans and our work so that we can be like Christ to those around us.

When we discover, in the middle of our days--our work especially--Jesus inviting us to have influence, to follow him over to here or there, to do this or that for him, what does it take for us to act with responsive flexibility the way these fisherman do?

Conclusion:

God is always calling to us to follow him in that discipleship way more and more completely, and he's doing it in the middle our lives, the middle of our occupations, our hobbies, our responsibilities, our pressures, and our exhaustion.

How can these places where our energy and care go

become metaphors for us about the way God wants to use us in the world? Jesus says to some fisherman they'll catch people, and they helped change the world because they said "okay." What does he say to us parents, engineers, teachers, mathematicians, homemakers, genealogists, accountants, students, retirees, laborers, programmers, and all the rest of what we are?

And maybe finding a way to connect where our time goes now to the how God might use us in His Kingdom is critical. Because God may not--probably won't--call us to drop "everything" in our lives in order to follow him, but he will definitely now and then call us to leave behind whatever demands our attention right now--and it'll probably be a boatload of responsibility even if it isn't a boatload full of fish and broken tools.

Saying no to what's objectively urgent so that we can say yes to what Jesus calls us to is a great test of our trust. Saying no to what's urgent so that we can say yes to what Jesus calls us to is a great test of our trust. I pray that we can all follow Jesus more fully, and let that affect the entire course our lives take from this morning on.