

We've Come This Far by Faith, and God Isn't Finished Yet
Matthew 4:12-23; Isaiah 9:1-4

Isaiah 9:1-4

¹But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.

In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Matthew 4:12-23

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea,
across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶the 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.”

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸As 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 sea—for they were fishermen.

¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

²¹As 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.

²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus 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.

The Sermon

Some years ago, I was in an email conversation with one of my earliest mentors in ministry, and at one point she offered me a handful of questions which I wasn't sure whether she was asking me to respond, or simply offering up food for thought.

She may have already posited one or two things that I may have thought were a bit presumptuous, so maybe something had just rubbed me the wrong way, and, unfortunately, it was in that context that she asked another question that struck me the wrong way.

I didn't read it the way she meant it, and I reacted poorly.

(I owe her an apology for that. There have been a number of times during the now almost 40 years since as a youth advisor at church, she reached out and rescued a lost 15-year-old kid, when she has graciously overlooked my acting like a big baby.)

Anyway, the question was: Who are you trying to impress?

First of all, it's "whom," but I don't think that was what tripped me up.

Probably my overly defensive reaction was something like, I'm not *trying* to "impress" anybody; I'm a minister trying to do whatever it is we're supposed to do.

For that matter, I'm whatever *else* I am to people in this world: offspring, sibling, spouse, parent, friend, colleague, neighbor, sparring partner, whatever.

I'm just trying to be and do the best I can. I'm not in any of these relationships for the glory or the recognition. I'm not trying to *impress* anybody.

But as years go by, that question, or something like it, begins to resonate.

When I was a kid, I used to like to drop names into conversations with adults that I knew they would recognize—partly out of historical interest, but partly to show off that I knew them.

Sports figures, actresses, political figures, people who were long since gone from the scene but whose names lingered in the minds of many—it was always fun to get the spark of recognition, and sometimes the amazement, that somebody from a younger generation still knew about Oscar Robertson or Grace Kelly or Adlai Stevenson.

One time Vivian and I and another friend were going to see the Kingston Trio. This was 1991, so it was, ahem, somewhat after their peak, when “Tom Dooley” had been all over the radio in 1957.

Anyway, there was an older lady with whom I shared work space at the summer internship I was serving, and she was not easy to impress, so on the Friday of the show, as we were getting ready to close for the day, I not-so-casually mentioned that some friends and I were going to see the Kingston Trio that night. I was ready to see her eyes sparkle with warm memories.

She said, “My kids used to play that racket in the basement.”

I was kind of delighted to know there were still people around for whom the Kingston Trio was the noisy garbage their kids played.

Peter O’Toole, one of the last of a certain legendary generation of English actors, was working on his memoirs, very late in life—he died in 2013—but when he mentioned in interviews that he was trying to write his autobiography, he’d say it was frustrating work:

he would remember some happy or funny or poignant memory to include, and he’d go to pick up the phone and reminisce with the people involved, but he had outlived so many of his contemporaries that time after time, there was no one to share the memory with.

As we go through life, there are points when the people for whom, and in whose sight, we wanted to do well—teachers, parents, mentors, grandparents, professors, employers, Sunday School teachers, people who were smarter than us, or funnier, or more athletic and fit, or more financially successful, or more faithful—there are points when we realize those people are no longer in a position to give us the positive feedback and encouragement and reinforcement that had been so crucial to our sense that we were learning and growing into the world.

And we learn that our mentors and teachers weren't sharing their wisdom and example with us just with the sense that we would now all enjoy it together.

They were handing something on.

And we become aware, suddenly or gradually, that now *we* are the ones who, simply by our own lives and examples, can offer encouragement and wisdom to the next people coming along.

And that can be when a kindergartner becomes a first grader, or when a great-grandparent becomes a great-great grandparent, or any of the ten thousand other sets of stages that people may move through in their lives.

We carry the baton because we have been entrusted with it.

We carry the baton because it's our turn.

We carry the baton because the track goes around and around, and just as the baton was handed to us, we *will* hand it on—we won't choose; it absolutely *will* happen—we will hand it on to those who are up next.

Who are the sacred, sainted people with whom you are most pleased to have found favor and blessing and encouragement?

Upon whom do you hope to have left a positive impression; who do you hope will have seen what you have achieved, or what kindnesses you have done, or how far you have come, and will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant?"

Four lines particularly stand out to me in Matthew's verses about Jesus beginning his ministry.

Matthew quotes Isaiah saying:

“For those who sat in the region and shadow of death,
light has dawned;”

And first Jesus says: Turn yourself around, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

And then Jesus says: Follow me, and I’ll have you fishing for people.

And then Matthew himself says: Jesus went proclaiming the good news and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

In Galilee, in Capernaum, by the sea, light has dawned on a weary world. And *our* world is weary right now, too.

Psalm 69 starts off:

“Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, there is no foothold;
I’ve come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.”

But now, light has dawned, even for the people—*especially* for the people—who sat in darkness and the shadow of death.

And Jesus says, “Turn around. Repent. The kingdom of heaven has come near.” You are headed away from the light; I am the light. Come home. Come back to your creator, come back to your purpose, come back to the promise of who you are and what you can be and what God still has in store for you.

Follow me, and I’ll have you fishing for people.

Maybe even yourself, you who are weary with crying; whose eyes grow dim with waiting; who can hardly even get the sound to come out of

your mouth to say, “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.”

Follow me, he says, and let’s see how many we can bring safely out of the deep water.

Follow me, because I’m going to go throughout the country, I’m going to teach even in their synagogues and churches where they think they know it all; I’m going to proclaim the good news, and cure every disease and every sickness among all the people.

This is not just good news about some future kingdom.

This starts right now, if you will follow me.

In a time of bitterness and division, the People of God need to remember who we are—to remember our call.

When we pray, it is worthwhile from time to time to reflect on the question: What am I looking for?

But it’s also worth considering: When the kingdom of heaven has come near, what is God looking for in me?

Maybe God is tugging at your sleeve, whispering to get your attention.

Maybe God is throwing a napkin across the banquet table, or banging metal trash can lids together.

Maybe God seems to be somehow stirring something up with you.

Or maybe God isn’t messing with you at all; maybe all this feeling of being messed with is just the reality of moving through a mortal life that God has vested you with for this all too fleeting time.

But one way or another, God wants something with you.

What do you suppose that is?

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