

The Call to the Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew 4:12–23

Let us pray: Father, today we turn to the Lord Jesus. Cleanse us by your word and renew our spirits, shaping us according to your will. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, the Gospel passage we read today shows us the moment when Jesus' public ministry truly begins. He has already been baptized, and he has overcome temptation in the wilderness. Now, in Matthew chapter 4, a new beginning takes place.

But this beginning does not happen in Jerusalem. It does not take place at the center of religious or political power, nor among the powerful. Jesus' ministry begins in Galilee. This fact alone tells us something important about who Jesus is and about the way God works.

Matthew tells us that after John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus withdrew into Galilee. We might ask, when John was arrested, why did Jesus not rescue him? John the Baptist was the prophet who not only prepared the way for Christ, but also foreshadowed Christ's ministry. John's arrest and death point forward to the suffering and death of Christ. In that sense, John's death was the completion of his calling. For this reason, Jesus did not rescue him.

Jesus withdrew to Nazareth in Galilee, but then left that town and made his home in Capernaum, by the Sea of Galilee. Why did Jesus withdraw to Galilee rather than Jerusalem? This was not a random choice. Matthew is very clear: all of this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "*The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light...*" (Isaiah 9:2, ESV).

Galilee was not a spiritual center. It was heavily influenced by Gentile culture, far from the temple, and looked down upon by the religious leaders. Jesus did not begin his ministry with power in Jerusalem, the political and religious center. Instead, he began the kingdom of God among those who most needed the light, among the people whom others called "the people dwelling in darkness."

This is the heart of the gospel. God's light does not shine only in places that already appear holy. It comes first to places of weariness, confusion, and marginalization.

This story is not only the story of Galilee. It is our story as well. Where there is fear and loss, guilt and exhaustion, there Christ comes as light. The light does not wait for the darkness to disappear. The light enters into the darkness.

And this is what it means: even when our lives are not yet put in order, even when our prayers are imperfect, even when our faith is shaken, Christ does not say, "I will come when you are a little better." He comes to us where we are.

Right there, in that very place, to those very people, Jesus begins to proclaim his message. It is simple, yet unmistakably clear: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

This is the same message John the Baptist proclaimed. But now it carries an entirely different weight. John announced that the kingdom of God was coming—that the Messiah was on the way. The kingdom of heaven that Jesus proclaims is Jesus himself. Therefore, the kingdom of God has already arrived. The “kingdom of heaven” Jesus speaks of here is not a distant place we go after death. It refers to God’s reign, God’s life-giving rule.

The phrase “*is at hand*” means that the kingdom of God is not far away, not something we must wander long and hard to find. It is so near that, from where we are standing right now, a change of direction is enough to reach it. Just as, when we take a wrong path, the solution is not to rush ahead but to correct our direction, Jesus calls us to repent.

Repentance is not simply a feeling of regret over mistakes. As I said last Sunday, sin is not merely a few wrong actions or moral failures. Sin is a way of life that assumes we can live without God, a posture of existence in which we did not acknowledge God as Lord. Repentance, then, means turning away from that way of life—turning toward Christ. It means laying down the claim that we are the masters of our own lives and welcoming God once again as Lord.

In the phrase “*he went and lived in Capernaum*,” the verb translated “*lived*” does not mean staying as a guest, but dwelling as an owner. Capernaum was the place where Jesus spent most of his public ministry and carried out much of his work. And yet, the people there did not truly believe in him. Capernaum stands as a picture of us in our unbelief. Jesus comes as Lord, yet so often we neither trust him nor follow him as Lord. We call on Jesus when we need him. But once our needs are met, Jesus becomes someone who may leave—a guest or a temporary tenant.

Paul writes to the believers in Ephesus, “*so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith*” (Ephesians 3:17). The word translated “*dwell*” here is the same word used for “*lived*” in Capernaum. For many of the Ephesian believers, Christ was not truly dwelling in their hearts as Lord. That’s why Paul prayed like that. In explaining this passage, the theologian Handley Moule said that the Lord enters not merely to encourage and comfort, but first and foremost to rule.

Is he merely a temporary visitor in our lives, or does he dwell as our Lord? Let us ask in faith that he would rule over us.

Where God reigns, God’s will, not our own desires or ambitions, becomes central, and broken lives begin to find their proper place again. When God’s will is honored in a household, that home becomes a place of God’s kingdom. When prayer comes before our own words, that household comes under God’s rule.

The same is true in our workplaces. When we choose honesty even when it seems it may cost us, the kingdom of God comes to that place. The same is true in our hearts. Each time complaint and fear rise up, and we choose instead to trust God, the kingdom of God takes root within us.

That is why, immediately after calling people to repent, Jesus speaks these words: "**Follow me.**" The kingdom of God is not a path for which we are given only a map and told to find our own way. It is a way of walking behind Jesus, who goes before us.

By the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees Simon Peter and Andrew and says to them, "**Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men**" (Matthew 4:19). Immediately they leave their nets and follow him. A little later, he calls James and John. They leave the boat and their father and follow Jesus as well (vv. 21–22).

We often imagine fishermen as poor, uneducated people who did hard labor simply because they had no other choice. But the fishermen of Galilee were not at the very bottom of society. They owned boats, had the skills and experience to maintain their nets, and in some cases lived relatively stable lives—stable enough even to hire others.

So when they left their nets and walked away from their boats and their father, it was not because those things were easy to give up. They were laying down something that truly mattered.

Those nets were not merely tools. They were their livelihood and, at the same time, their future, their sense of security. Leaving the nets was not choosing poverty. It was choosing a different master. It was not giving up on life, not a failure, but a change of direction.

Jesus did not tell them to abandon their work; he gave them a purpose that went beyond their work. Fish, when they are caught, die. But people live when they are connected to Jesus. To be "fishers of men" is not to seize or control people, but to become a channel that connects them to the Lord, who is life.

Following Jesus always requires trust and letting something go. Sometimes it is comfort. Sometimes it is pride. Sometimes it is fear. But if we let go of things for Jesus, he always returns something better for us. He gives greater life. So if Jesus were to say to us today, "**Follow me,**" what is it that we are still holding on to and have not yet been able to lay down?

Matthew summarizes Jesus' ministry concisely with three actions. Jesus taught, proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God, and healed those who were sick and weak.

This is not a message that addresses only one part of life. It is not a gospel that merely comforts the heart and stops there, nor a gospel that deals only with physical pain. The gospel of Jesus is holistic: it changes the way people think and the direction of their lives, restores relationships, and brings life to both body and soul.

What is important is that after calling the disciples, Jesus immediately invited them into this very work. He called them to the place of teaching, to the place of proclaiming the good news, and to the side of wounded and broken people.

People came to Jesus, carrying their own burdens, because of illness, because of fear, or because their lives had fallen apart. But after encountering Jesus, they did not go back having solved only one problem. They came to see again where their lives were meant to be headed.

Jesus does not merely remove suffering. He restores meaning to their lives and calls people back into the life of God. And so the news spread, and people followed him. The light was spreading.

And today, Jesus calls us as well to take part in the spreading of that light. Not all of us are called to be preachers. But he does call us to be people who bear witness to the gospel through our words and our lives, people who know how to remain alongside wounded neighbors, people who become channels through which God's life can flow. The story that began in Galilee now calls us to carry it forward into each of our own lives.

Brothers and sisters, today's passage is not given simply to record what Jesus did in Galilee. It reveals who Jesus is, and what kind of life those who follow Jesus are invited into. Jesus entered the darkness as light, proclaimed the kingdom of God, and remained among the wounded. And he called disciples to walk with him right into the midst of that work. Here, in this place, we hear Jesus' invitation once again: **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." "Follow me."**

We too were once people sitting in darkness, but now the light has come near. God does not call us in order to control us, but in order to give us life. And so our response today is not to understand everything, but to take one step forward.

To trust the word and rely on grace as we follow the Lord is not a grand or heroic resolution. It is choosing, right where we are today, to turn our direction toward Christ. We do not become people of light because we are perfect; we become people of light because we are following the Lord.

So, brothers and sisters, choose small obedience today rather than a great decision for tomorrow. And through our lives, quietly yet clearly, let us reveal that the kingdom of God has come near. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, you who shine the light of the gospel upon us who once sat in darkness, thank you for inviting us to follow you with a vision of the kingdom of heaven. Lead the rest of our lives so that we may live in our new identity, as fishers of people. In the name of Jesus Christ, Lord of all. Amen.