

“Preparing for Ministry”
3rd Sunday After Epiphany, Year A
January 27, 2008

Texts: Psalm 139:1-11 / Amos 3:1-8 / 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 / Matthew 4:12-23

Matthew 4:12-25

12 Now when [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. **13** And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, **14** so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: **15** “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— **16** the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.” **17** From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

18 While walking 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. **19** And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” **20** Immediately they left their nets and followed him. **21** And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. **22** Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

23 And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. **24** So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. **25** And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

This narrative from St. Matthew’s Gospel can be easily overlooked. It falls smack in the middle of two very memorable events in Jesus Christ’s life. Just after the episode described in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus gives possibly His greatest and most sustained teaching, the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Just prior to our passage from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan and then He is driven into the Judean wilderness to fast and be tempted by Satan. Having held off Satan’s temptations, Christ is then

ministered to by angels. What an amazing time that must have been for Jesus...to come against Satan, to hold your own and even better him, and then to rejoice in your victory with the angels of Heaven. Wow! Can you imagine!

The very next verse (Mt 4:12) says, “Now when [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.” “...He withdrew into Galilee”? What’s up with that? Jesus had just defeated Satan in a pitched battle in the wilderness. He had just worshipped with the hosts of heaven. He gets one bad bit of news – that John has been arrested – and He withdraws!? Where is the power in that? Why isn’t Jesus emptying the caverns of Hades? Why isn’t Jesus taming the storms and stilling the oceans? Instead He withdraws to his own region, and in the next verse the Scripture says that He leaves from Nazareth. So, after John the Baptist is arrested He runs home to mommy?

No, not exactly, but there is a point to having times where we humans...and recall that Jesus was fully human...need down time; especially after we have expended ourselves emotionally, spiritually, and physically. If we are not prepared emotionally, spiritually, and physically to fight the battle, then Satan could well get the best of us. So, Jesus withdraws into His own country to pray and prepare. And then He comes out fighting...His ministry officially begins.

But, notice first that His ministry falls on the heels of one who has been faithful to His own calling...John the Baptist. Notice that Jesus’ ministry does not even begin until the forerunner, John the Baptist, has run his full course, not until his ministry has ceased, until his arrest. Sometimes our ministry is simply preparing to do ministry. I believe that we are in such a time right now at St. John’s.

I don’t know about how it is at your house, but when we invite folks over to the rectory, the day or two leading up to the party is a time of great activity, preparing the rectory for all those who are coming. It is a time of getting our house in order because folks are “coming over.” There is much that needs to be done to prepare.

Secondly, notice that Jesus’ own first words of preaching are exactly the same words that John the Baptist used...exactly, to the word.

**metanoei`te: h[ggiken ga;r hJ basileiva tw`n
oujranw`n.**

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

Jesus opens first with the need for all to repent. The same is true today. Our ministry must first begin with repentance. If we are to truly and honestly get our house in order, we must first repent and turn from all those things that are distracting us from spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Greek word used by Jesus, repent -- **metanoei`te** – (present imperfect active), is actually a compound word consisting of the words meta- and -noia. Literally, meta- means “to change” and -noia means “to think.” Thus, the compound word means

to repent, to change one’s thinking, to turn about [turn 180 degrees]. The primary sense in Judaism is always a change in man’s attitude toward God and in the conduct of life. It involved the confession of sin, a prayer of remorse, and the forsaking of sin, all of which was condition for the messianic redemption” (Rogers & Rogers, 1998, p. 5)

The prefix meta- is used in many English words. Since I was a geologist, there is one group of rocks that have this prefix. Does anybody recall, from your basic earth science training, the three broad groups of rocks that are found: igneous (like volcanoes), sedimentary (like beach sands, limestone, etc.) and then...metamorphic rocks. Metamorphic means those rocks that are made deep in the earth under great strain, heat and pressure, from other rocks. The starting materials, sometimes even the chemical compositions are the same as igneous and sedimentary rocks, but metamorphic rocks have undergone intense heat and pressure. So it is with us. Under the intense heat and pressure of this world and the saving grace of Jesus Christ...through suffering, hardship, and intense soul-searching, we see the need for meta-noia in our lives; for a change of heart and of thinking. If you have never undergone such an intense soul-searching or changing of your heart, then your faith is not likely to be the faith that Christ wants you to have in the end. Only through suffering, through giving up our own wants and desires, of desiring Christ and Him

alone can we arrive at a place of meta-noia...Where our hearts are truly changed, transformed, turned inside-out, turned 180 degrees. That is repentance.

One commentator has said that repentance is “a radical and deliberate turning or returning to God that results in moral and ethical change and action.” When you came to know and follow Jesus, was it an easy decision? Did it transform your relationships? The way you do business? The way you talk? The way you think? True repentance means that our whole way of thinking, in church and out of church, is radically altered.

Thirdly, John the Baptist and Christ give a warning and an encouragement. “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” The Kingdom of Heaven is arriving. It is already partly here and partly in the future. This expression, ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν, “Kingdom of heaven,” is found 32x in the Gospel of Matthew and only in this Gospel. It is a major theme throughout Jesus’ ministry. It speaks of the rule, the sovereignty of God, and is both “a present reality and a future hope.” It is often said that the Kingdom of Heaven is about “the already and the not yet.” Do you sense the excitement and anticipation – God’s kingdom breaking in on us, but we need to prepare for an even greater breaking in of the Kingdom of Heaven as the Holy Spirit flings open the doors to do a mighty work here at St. John’s.

Fourthly, this is also a time when Jesus Christ is calling His true disciples. Notice that all Jesus has to say is, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” The next word in Scripture after the calling is “immediately.” In the original Greek, verses 20 and 22 begin exactly the same way, οἱ δὲ εὐθὺς" which means “and they immediately.” First Peter and Andrew, then the sons of Zebedee, James and John. Both sets of brothers did not even hesitate, did not ask any questions, did not even take the time to say goodbye to their parents. The Scripture says, “Immediately” they followed Jesus. The Scripture says that Andrew and Peter “left their nets” and that James and John “left their boat and their father.”

So Jesus’ calling, for each and every one of us involves a leaving...a leaving behind of something. By these two callings we can classify the apostles leaving as

first leaving our livelihood and the tools of our livelihood; secondly leaving the things we own; and thirdly leaving family. Can you even imagine a calling that would cause you to drop everything...your livelihood, your busy-ness, your activities, even your family...to follow Jesus?

Isaiah chapter 40, beginning at the third verse says,

3 A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Jesus had no following until His time was ready, until He was fully prepared for ministry. Sometimes our greatest calling for a time is preparation.

What is hindering us from ministry at St. John’s? What is keeping us from spreading the Gospel all over these Sea Islands? The people are moving here in droves...why aren’t they darkening our doors?

What is hindering **you** from being fully committed to Jesus Christ? What is keeping you from giving yourself fully to the spread of the Gospel here at St. John’s?

Yesterday we had the great privilege to consecrate the XIVth Bishop of South Carolina, the Rt. Rev. Mark Joseph Lawrence. At the conclusion of the rousing, spirit-filled, 3-hour service we sang Hymn 541, “Come, labor on” during the recessional. The first, fourth, and fifth verses say this,

Come, labor on. Who dares stand idle on the harvest plain, while all around us waves the golden grain? And to each servant does the Master say, “Go, work today.”

Come, labor on. Claim the high calling angels cannot share – to young and old
the Gospel gladness bear: redeem the time; its hours too swiftly fly. The
night draws nigh.

Come, labor on. No time for rest, till glows the western sky, till the long
shadows o'er our pathway lie, and a glad sound comes with the setting sun,
-- "Servants, well done."

Last night, Fr. Joe and I had the privilege to attend a dinner in Bishop Mark's
honor. His closing remarks at that dinner were these: "If you've never had God
encounter you in a powerful way, then you've never been out on a limb." Here's to
many opportunities for us, brothers and sisters, to be out on a limb with Jesus!

Amen.

¹² jAkouvsa" de; o{ti jIwavngh" paredovqh ajnecwvrhsen
eij" th;n Galilaivan. ¹³kai; katalipw;n th;n Nazara; ejlqw;n
katwv/khsen eij" Kafarnaou;m th;n paraqalassivan ejn
oJrivoi" Zabolw;n kai; Nefqalivm: ¹⁴i{na plhrwqh`/ to;
rJhqe;n dia; jHsaivYou tou` profhvtou levgonto":

¹⁵**gh` Zabolw;n kai; gh` Nefqalivm,
oJdo;n qalavssh", pevran tou` jIordavnou,
Galilaiva tw`n ejqnw`n,**

¹⁶**oJ lao;" oJ kaqhvmeno" ejn skovtei
fw`" ei\den mevga,
kai; toi`" kaqhmevnoi" ejn cwwra/ kai; skia`/ qanavtou
fw`" ajnevteilen aujtoi`".**

¹⁷ jApo; tovte h[rxato oJ jIhsou`" khruvssein kai;
levgein: metanoei`te: h[ggiken ga;r hJ basileiva tw`n
oujranw`n.

¹⁸Peripatw`n de; para; th;n qavlassan th`" Galilaiva"
ei\den duvo ajdelfouv", Sivmwna to;n legovmenon Pevtron

kai; jAndrevan to;n ajdelfo;n aujtou`, bavllonta"
 ajmfivblhstron eij" th;n qavlassan: h\san ga;r aJliei`".
¹⁹kai; levgei aujtoi`": deu`te oj pivsw mou, kai; poi hvsw
 uJma`" aJliei`" ajnqrwvwn. ²⁰oiJ de; eujqevw" ajfevnte" ta;
 divktua hjkolouvqhsan aujtw`/. ²¹kai; proba;" ejkei`gen
 ei\den a[llou" duvo ajdelfouv", jIavkwbon to;n tou`
 Zebedaivou kai; jIwavnhn to;n ajdelfo;n aujtou`, ejn tw`/
 ploivw/ meta; Zebedaivou tou` patro;" aujtw`n
 katartivzonta" ta; divktua aujtw`n, kai; ejkavlesen
 aujtouv". ²²oiJ de; eujqevw" ajfevnte" to; ploi`on kai; to;n
 patevra aujtw`n hjkolouvqhsan aujtw`/.
²³Kai; perih`gen ejn o{lh/ th`/ Galilaiva/ didavskwn ejn
 tai`" sunagwgai`" aujtw`n kai; khruvsswn to; eujaggevlion
 th`" basileiva" kai; qerapeuvwn pa`san novson kai; pa`san
 malakivan ejn tw`/ law`/. ²⁴Kai; ajph`lqen hJ ajkoh; aujtou`
 eij" o{lhn th;n Surivan: kai; proshvnegkan aujtw`/ pavnta"
 tou;" kakw`" e[conta" poikivlai" novsoi" kai; basavnoi"
 sunecomevnou" »kai;¼ daimonizomevnou" kai; selhniazomevnou"
 kai; paralutikov", kai; ejqeravpeusen aujtouv". ²⁵kai;
 hjkolouvqhsan aujtw`/ o{cloi polloi; ajpo; th`" Galilaiva"
 kai; Dekapovlew" kai; JIerosoluvmwn kai; jIoudaiva" kai;
 pevran tou` jIordavnou.