

Sunday, January 26, 2020
10:00 AM Worship
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenwood, SC
Rev. Caroline V. Dennis
“The Promise of Discipleship”
Psalm 27:1, 4-9
Matthew 4:12-23

Our first scripture comes from the book of Psalms, chapter 27, verses 1, 4-9. Listen now for God’s word to you.

- 1 The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
- 4 One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.
- 5 For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.
- 6 Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.
- 7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
- 8 “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.
- 9 Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

As we enter our third week in the series, Extraordinary Promises for Ordinary Times, we return to the Gospel of Matthew, searching for the promise of discipleship. Jesus has been born, grown-up, baptized, and tempted, and now embarks on his public ministry by starting a most unusual school. A traveling school of unlikely students. Listen carefully, as Matthew, narrows our focus to a particular time, and a particular place, and gives us a view of that kingdom that John and Jesus proclaimed to be right there. It's kind of a big bang moment. Like the seed of an idea, that grows into a full fledged thing, that no one but God could have imagined.

Listen now for God's word for this time, for this place, for you.

Second Reading

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 —
16 the 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.

23 Jesus 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.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I don't know if you are on Facebook or not, but if you are, I hope that at least some of your friends are like mine. I have several friends who cannot refrain from sharing the glory they witness of the sun rising or setting. Haven't we had some beautiful sunrises... if you are awake that early, and sunsets lately. It turns out we are not the only place fortunate enough to be experiencing this glory. My friends in Indiana and on the coast here in South Carolina and down in Atlanta are also posting these beautiful photos. I bet if your friends range further afield you are seeing these beautiful images from the west coast, and Canada, Mexico and maybe even Bangladesh! My Facebook and real life friend, David Bell, told me the other day, that he is fortunate enough to live on a lake where he can get up early in the morning, snap and share a picture of the sunrise, and then go back to bed.

Our Bible friend Matthew has also witnessed a glorious sunrise on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he accompanies the image he shares with poetry from the Prophet Isaiah,

15 “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,

on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles —

16 the people who sat in darkness

have seen a great light,

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light has dawned.”

Jesus had come to Capernum, a fishing village on the edge of the sea of Galilee, fifteen miles east of his home in Nazareth. He came with the same message John had been proclaiming to the south, along the shore of the Jordan river, “Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand!”

Now, I want you to do some holy imagining with me, our friend, Alice Rigil would have said, “pardon me while I put on my sanctified imagination.” I want you to put on your holy imagination, because I want you to read between the lines with me, to take some time to wonder about the text.

Here comes this fellow, from... “not around here.” As they say in the Appalachian Mountains, “from off.” And maybe he’s been in town for a few days, preaching about this kingdom. And maybe he has even been down by the seaside talking to the fishermen. Maybe, he has even gotten to know Peter and Andrew, James and John, like the young adults do, down at the pub after work. Actually, in his gospel, John tells us that Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist and that he brought his brother Simon Peter to meet Jesus. The fact that Andrew and Peter were out actively looking for the Messiah by day and fishing by night tells me that they are like so many people we know, laboring hard AND looking for something to save them. Maybe Peter and Andrew, James and John, already know that this carpenter’s son, is about as good with a fishing metaphor as I am with a sports metaphor, or a fishing metaphor for that matter.

Now, apparently, Jesus is an early riser, as I am given to understand that fishing on the sea of Galilee was a nighttime event, followed by days of net mending and fish selling and boat scrubbing. So, my sanctified imagination has this carpenter’s son

from... not around here, entering into a busy work place, and calling out to not necessarily strangers, maybe even friends, and saying, "let's go."

And the remarkable thing is... they do! Immediately. Now, I don't know what it was about Jesus that made them lay down their nets and follow him that day. Maybe it was the way he looked at them in the eye, and somehow they knew, he understood them.

When I was a little girl, I received a Bible for Easter. It was the full Bible text and had just a few pictures, but those pictures are how I see the Bible characters even to this day. In my pictures, Jesus was not contemplative or sad with a far away look, Jesus looked right out of the page with sparkling eyes that were playful, perhaps a bit mischievous. Those eyes looked right at me, and if he had asked, I would have followed him too.

For whatever reason, first Peter and Andrew, then James and John, drop what they are doing and follow Jesus. Now I wonder if they thought they were just following him for an hour, or a day. I wonder if they knew they would never go back to those nets... not full time anyway... not the same way anyway. For this light that had dawned on them would open their eyes to the kingdom that was right there... right there... and everywhere he would take them.

He promised them, they would fish for people. What a funny thing to say. That alone would make me curious enough to follow him. And fish for people they did, people they had never really seen before Jesus came along, hungry people, and thirsty people, the lame and the blind, sinners and tax collectors, Samaritans and Pharisees.

When they laid down their nets and followed him, I don't think they knew that they would be his disciples, his students. That he would teach them how to find the kingdom at hand... how to be the kingdom at hand. But we know the rest of the story, the promise of the life they lived following him.

We know they messed up often. You remember that time Peter reprimanded Jesus for talking about his death. And how Peter denied Jesus in the worst hour of his life. But we remember too that Jesus forgave Peter, giving him as many chances to declare his love as he had denied him, and that each time Jesus gave him a mission, not a fisherman's mission, but a shepherd's mission, the Shepherd's mission – “feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my sheep.”

We know they often didn't understand. You remember how they would ask him to explain his stories.

We know they often disagreed with one another, and even with Jesus. You remember how James and John had asked for prime seats at the kingdom table, and all the other disciples had gotten angry with them.

We know too that when they were ready, Jesus sent them out, two by two, the same way he had gathered them up, to do some kingdom fishing of their own – no net, no second pair of shoes, no GPS, just the word of God and each other. That Andrew is known for introducing Peter to Jesus and for bringing the Gentiles to Jesus. And you remember, that after he left them and returned to the Father, they became the teachers and the healers, and the community builders, equipped by the

Holy Spirit to speak whatever language was necessary to get the message across, to share the glory of the son-rise they had seen.

And we know too that they suffered. Imprisoned and even put to death for sharing the things they had come to know by walking with Jesus.

This is the promise of discipleship, of being a student in the traveling Jesus School. You will fish for people, you had never noticed before, hungry people, thirsty people, not from here people, sick people, lonely people, excluded people, better than you people, less than you people, needing community people. And you will gather them in.

This is the promise of discipleship. You will mess up. You will not always understand. You will disagree with the other disciples, and sometimes even with Jesus.

This is the promise of discipleship. You will grow into people who invite others into this kingdom school, saying, “follow me,” because you have found something you know they need. You have seen the rising of the sun.

And this too is the promise of discipleship. You will suffer, because you will come to believe in the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed to be right at hand. But the world will ridicule you, for your radical inclusion, your self-giving love, your bold witness against injustice, your commitment to mercy. You will suffer, for the love you have of him, and the fellow students in his traveling school. For their sorrows will be your sorrows, and their joys will be your joys.

This is the promise of discipleship. You will see the kingdom at hand. You will be the kingdom at hand.

That ask, “follow me.” That answer, “yes, for this moment, in this moment.” Changed everything for Peter and Andrew, James and John. Every day, Jesus comes to us, in the midst of our daily tasks and invites us saying, “follow me.” Every day, in every moment we decide if we will lay down our nets and go.

When you look back over your life. Can you see the promise of discipleship fulfilled? Have you been a fisher of people? Have you gathered folks into God’s love. Have you made mistakes and been forgiven? Have you not understood God’s ways or the teachings of Jesus? Have you disagreed with other disciples? Have you been fed when you were hungry? Had the chance to share the SonRise you experienced?

Who do you know that might just be waiting for you to ask, “come and follow me, I know the way to the kingdom.” Whose discipleship story will start today? All you have to do is share what you have seen. It is a seed of an idea, that will grow into a thing that only God can imagine. It could be a big bang moment.

Who are we to keep the promise to ourselves? Who are we not to share the son-rise?

