

The Problem of Discipleship

Isaiah 9:1-4

Matthew 4:12-23

“Immediately they left their nets and followed him....Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.”

The problem of discipleship, if we are honest with ourselves, is what we must leave in order to follow Jesus. When you think of the stories in Scripture, you think of disciples who left nets and boats and families; you also think of the rich young man who could not leave his stuff and the people with reasonable excuses about saying farewell to family or a father to bury; and then you think of the early Christians who left the synagogue as well as the pagans who quit the cult of Caesar. Leaving all these things would be hard enough; but Walter Brueggemann suggests that the hardest thing to leave is less tangible than all these. He says that the call of Jesus “is not to join an institution or to sign a pledge card; it is rather to sign on for *a different narrative account of reality* that is in profound contrast to the dominant account of reality into which we are all summarily inducted....The calling God,” he goes on, “means for us to disengage from the postures, habits, and assumptions that define the world of power and injustice that is so devoid of mercy and compassion in every arena of life. The call is away from ordinary life, ordinary possessions, and ordinary assumptions to a way of life that the world judges to be impossible.”

So taking our lead from Brueggemann, we begin this morning with the dominant account of reality that needs to be left. When Matthew wrote his Gospel, he was writing to a community whose dominant account of reality was a narrative of loss: the loss of the Temple which had been reduced to rubble in 70 A.D.; the loss of a future as they adjusted to life under the occupation of Rome; and finally, the most devastating loss of all, the loss of faith in God’s presence.

This rings a bell in my mind because you and I have come to Matthew’s Gospel in the wake of two days whose dominant accounts of reality have involved narratives of loss. In an inaugural address already being remembered for the phrase, “This American carnage stops here,” the new President spoke of “Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities, rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation. An education system flush with cash but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge. And the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.” A narrative of loss, to be sure, countered with a narrative of reversal: that, from now on, it will be America first.

And on the following day, marches across the nation and the world were populated by hundreds of thousands of people who carried signs that narrated the anticipated losses of health care and reproductive rights, of immigrant and human rights, of women’s and LGBTQ rights, of Black lives’ and brown lives’ rights. Again, narratives of loss, countered with narratives of protest: that, from now on, those who are most vulnerable will not be silent.

I think this is what it looks like when death occupies our common life and dictates the stories we live by. One narrative of loss begets another or rivals another and so on and so forth. These are precisely the narratives that we are not inclined to leave behind!

In the face of his own community’s losses, Matthew sets out to give a different narrative account of reality. But for Matthew to convince his community of the truth of the different story he is about to tell, he must begin with the narrative his readers know. So far in his Gospel, he has tried to connect the birth of this now grown man with Old Testament texts that point to the promised Messiah: Joseph who names him from David’s line, Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, Gentile kings coming from afar, Herod’s murderous rage echoing Pharaoh’s rage against Moses, the last of the prophets sent to prepare the way.

With our text this morning, he does the same. Speaking more theologically than geographically, Matthew notes that when Jesus hears of John’s arrest, he leaves his hometown of Nazareth for Capernaum by the sea. Capernaum was in Gentile territory, hinting at the church’s ministry to all nations; but more to Matthew’s immediate point, Capernaum was in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, two towns mentioned by the prophet Isaiah toward the end of the 8th century. As Matthew’s community is languishing under the occupation of Rome, Judah languished under the occupation of the Northern Kingdom and Syria. Enter the prophet Isaiah, who offered a different narrative account of reality, assuring Judah that the people who now walk in darkness will see a great light; that those who have been sitting in the region and the shadow of death will live in God’s light once again. God will break the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders and the rod of their oppressor. God will do this through a ruler who will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace; who will establish and uphold peace with

justice and righteousness. That ruler likely was Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, who ruled in righteousness for twenty-nine years.

Matthew sees in Jesus the same God coming to rival the reign of Rome in his time, but he sees more. From the time of John's arrest, Matthew writes, "Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near': literally, God's reign is coming toward you. Yet we must remember that Matthew is writing his Gospel from the perspective of the cross and empty tomb. He is not telling the story of a new Hezekiah who will rule for a few decades and die. Rather he believes that the God coming toward his community in Jesus is a God whose reign has defeated death forever on the cross and whose light, in the meantime, is shining on the margins where the outcasts and the diseased, the widow and the little child, the hopeless and the helpless dwell, assuring them that death will not have the final word: specifically, God's light is shining on all who are presently sitting defenseless in the region and the shadow of death under Roman occupation. It is a different narrative account of reality that proclaims death's impotence and love's victory!

Yet for Matthew's community and for ours, letting go of the narrative of loss and beginning to live as though the story of death's defeat is true misses the fact that discipleship is about a living relationship with the one who calls you from death to life. A different narrative may change your worldview, but I believe the more problematic aspect of discipleship has to do with how your relationship to Jesus reorders all of your relationships. In Matthew's account of the call of the disciples, Jesus' presence alone compels Simon Peter and Andrew to leave their nets and their families and set out to fish for people; causes James and John to abandon their boat and their father and follow. They give up everything to live in relation to him!

In response, we search for reasonable explanations. Sometimes when you inhabit a narrative of loss, when you walk in darkness, in the shadow of death—as we all walk in the shadow of death—you are vulnerable to any voice offering a better future, a way out, a hand up. But Jesus was not offering them any of those things. He simply offered himself and invited them to accompany him. Without knowing where they were going, they left their lives and their livelihoods. As the choir will soon sing, they simply heard, beside the Syrian sea, the gracious calling of the Lord and, without a word, rose and followed. "The first step," Dietrich Bonhoeffer told his seminarians, whose following of Jesus would become for them a life and death crisis, "places the disciple in the situation where faith is possible...But this first step is not the first stage of a career. Its sole justification is that it brings the disciple into fellowship with Jesus."

Still searching for a reason, I find myself wondering, on this third Sunday after Epiphany, if the light that shone out of Jesus and onto these fishermen in Capernaum was compelling because it was a light that revealed the truly human lost and hidden deep down in them all, even as the light would later come to reveal the God who was coming after them in him. I wonder if, in the midst of an empire that denied their humanity, they saw in the face of Jesus what it was to be seen; and heard in the call of Jesus a call to live in response to God's will rather than in fear of Caesar's decrees. Later, when they followed Jesus into synagogues where he taught and proclaimed the good news of God's reign; when they witnessed the Kingdom of Heaven coming near in diseases cured, the sick healed, demoniacs and epileptics and paralytics set free, I wonder if they began to see through Jesus' eyes the human being in every other person they encountered. The problem of discipleship is that it reorders our relationships, even our relationships with the very people our present narratives of loss deplore or have been given new permission to hate.

So in these days when we thought the divisions between us could not get deeper and they have, I pray first that this different narrative will loosen our grip on the narratives of loss that send us out to do battle with each other. But I pray more that, as we follow him in these words, we will begin to see through Jesus' eyes the human being in each other and in every other. I pray that, in the weeks ahead, he will teach this congregation no less than he taught his first disciples to see the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and the persecuted as those who are truly blessed in God's reign. I pray that he will show us no less than he showed Peter and Andrew, James and John, the Kingdom of Heaven breaking in as he heals the leper, a Roman centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law, two demoniacs, a paralytic, and as he dines with tax collectors and sinners: all people that these four fishermen never would have encountered had they not left their nets and boats and families and homes and followed him.

He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same words, 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is.