

Called to Fish and Spread the Light

A sermon preached by W. Dale Osborne on January 22, 2017

Lectionary texts: Isaiah 9: 1-4 and Matthew 4: 12-23

Brothers and sisters, children of the Divine One who lives and reigns forever and ever, you are called by God to achieve a great and glorious accomplishment. You, like Simon and Andrew – you, like James and John, the sons of Thunder, are called to usher in the Kingdom of God.

Over the past weekend, hundreds of thousands of human beings have gathered in our nation's capital for a variety of reasons and heartfelt purposes. They gathered with old friends and new. They gathered as young and elderly and all ages in between. They came together in a variety of outer garments and inner thoughts. Some were rich, some were poor. Their motivations were multifaceted and deeply felt. Many held signs while others held their breath.

On Friday, the vast majority of those who gathered in Washington, D.C., were there to welcome the peaceful transition of power in our United States system of democratic government. The largest part of those who gathered on Friday were there to express their jubilation and excitement over the inauguration of President Donald Trump. They endured the mist and rain in order to listen to military bands, receive prayers, watch the swearing in of President Trump and hear his inauguration speech. The people who gathered on Friday were beloved children of God who felt called to be present in that space, on that day, in that time.

Yesterday, on a cloudy Saturday in the city on the Potomac, huge crowds gathered to participate in something called the **Women's March on Washington**. The people who marched on Saturday were called into that space in and around the Washington Mall out of a sense of dedication and support for Women's rights and freedoms. They came together to express their solidarity and strength as they felt that those rights and freedoms may be severely altered during the Presidency of Donald Trump. Jane Walters and my wife Suzy rose at 4:30 am to prepare to board a bus that would carry them and scores of other children of God into the city of monuments and museums. All up and down the East coast and from many other cities and towns east of the Mississippi, dedicated human beings rose very early to board buses and trains of their own. I daresay scores of women and men from our church made their way either to Washington or to Raleigh for a sister march like no other before it. They gathered in mostly overcast settings to listen to speeches, receive prayers, sing along to stirring music and make their causes known.

Both of those gatherings, the one on Friday and the one on Saturday were populated by children of the Divine Creator of the universe. Both of those gatherings, the one attended by excited Trump supporters and the one attended by supporters of Women's rights were populated by people who felt a sense of calling for the purposes of their particular day. January 20 and January 21, 2017 will go down in recorded time as two very remarkable days in U.S. and possibly world history.

I wonder how Jesus would have participated on such a weekend? I wonder what words and practices he might have employed in order to build stronger relationships among human beings with seemingly opposite points of view? You may recall that this past Friday and Saturday had their fair share of fear and trepidation as so many differently motivated people gathered amidst heightened emotions and massive security put in place by the ruling government. What if his God incarnate ministry had begun on January 20 or 21, 2017 instead of approximately 2000 years ago?

Let's look for our cues on Jesus' potential modern day practices by taking a look at the Gospel according to Matthew which we heard a few moments ago. In that brief passage, we are made aware of a change in venue for Jesus. Jesus withdraws from Nazareth and heads down to Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee. Matthew reports that Jesus makes this move to fulfill the prophetic words of Isaiah. He is moving into a region where light is needed. Seems to me that more light is needed everywhere but Matthew's author has his own purposes. Right before Jesus makes his geographic move, his cousin John the Baptist has been arrested by the local governing body. John was probably arrested because he was stirring up the people with his talk of repentance and preparing the way for the Kingdom of God. Jesus makes his strategic move down the road to continue and augment the message his cousin John had started. He steps into the fray and boldly proclaims, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near." Now other than his private words to John at his baptism and the words he spoke to Satan during his 40 day wilderness pilgrimage, this is

the first public proclamation Jesus makes in Matthew's gospel – "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near."

Now if that 8 word phrase is the first public proclamation made by our Lord as he started his earthly ministry then I believe it might also be the first thing he would say as he walked around or on the reflecting pool in Washington, D.C. on either Friday or Saturday of this past weekend. "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near!" Repent children of God, we have work to do.

Denise Anderson, a well read and prophetic voice of the Presbyterian Church says it this way in the Christian Century magazine,

I'm always struck by the first part: "Repent." It's not just a command but also an invitation. It beckons the hearer to turn away from a course of action and choose a new (and better) way. The call to repent is powerful. It suggests that no one is beyond the reach of redemption, and that we all—all—can choose a different path. If we were once the enemy, we need not remain the enemy.

We strive not against people but against spiritual forces.

When Jesus meets Simon and Andrew, two career fishermen, he calls them to be fishers of people. I am reminded that at all turns it is people who are the goal. It is people whom God prizes. It is people whom God pursues. Though humans may write them off as enemies because of their behavior, their opinions, or their practices, God sees them as redeemable.

Political climates around the world are as challenging and menacing as they've ever been. The Christian is obligated to stand against and call out evil in all its manifestations: bigotry, oppression, and greed. And yet we hold in tension our simultaneous charge to call in all who practice these things. The crux of the gospel is not just that the kingdom of God has come near, but that we're called to repent. We cannot seek God's kingdom without seeking all people to participate in it.

Let me add to her commentary by reminding us that shortly after Jesus' proclamation to "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near.", he calls out two pairs of brothers to work with him on his ministry of Light and Love. We know the names of these two pairs of siblings. We also know their current professions and for John and James we know the name of their father, Zebedee. What we do not know is how each one of these pairs lived his life other than fishing. It is what we do not know about these two pairs of siblings that brings us into community with them and with the people who gathered in Washington over the weekend. For all we know, Simon Peter could have been a huge fan of casting the nets out over the left side of the boat while his brother Andrew might have been keen on only casting the nets out the right side of the boat. And John and James, the sons of Zebedee, how strikingly different might they have been in their personal perspectives. John may have believed that all of their family's problems could have been solved through negotiation and honest communication while James might have thought it more efficient to

simply bend under the authority and commands of Zebedee when household conflicts arose.

Regardless of their differences, known or unknown to Jesus, our Lord called them out to serve and spread the Good News of God's loving desires for humanity. In the same way, we are called by Christ to fish for people and spread the Light of God's love in this world. We will all do well to repent with our brothers and sisters who hold different points of view and work together as God leads us.

Isaiah 9:1-4

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

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles 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."

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." As 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. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

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