

**March 8, 2020**

**Second Sunday of Lent**

**Matthew 4: 12-22**

Prayer: Dear God, help us to see this familiar gospel story in a new light – like the light the prophet Isaiah spoke of. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

### **Butterflies ... and Fishers**

A lot of people ask about the butterflies on my stole. I think they expect them to be rife with some heavy religious meaning.

*Like, Oh, yes, the early church used the butterfly as a symbol of sanctification.*

But the truth is, they’re not rife with anything. They’re butterflies.

The writer Richard Bach said, “What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly.”

*What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly.*

That’s the story I’m going with. For the butterfly to emerge, the caterpillar has to disappear.

The caterpillar has to make a radical change in its life in order to become something else, something more glorious.

Today we're going to look at some people who did that, some people who made a radical change, an abrupt turn from what they were doing to something else entirely.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Matthew 4: 12-22**.

12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup>He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup>so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

<sup>15</sup>'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

<sup>16</sup>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.'

<sup>17</sup>From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

<sup>18</sup> 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 lake — for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' <sup>20</sup>Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

<sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

I know I say this a lot, but there is *so much* going on here. And for a Bible nerd like me, it's probably far more fascinating than it is for anybody else. I will try to impart my excitement.

This passage immediately follows Jesus' baptism and his temptation in the desert that we talked about last week. Jesus hears that John the

Baptist has been arrested, and he moves into Galilee to begin his public ministry.

I don't like the way the NRSV translates this first sentence. It says Jesus "withdrew" to Galilee. That makes it sound like he was reacting to the news of John's arrest with a retreat.

The original Greek doesn't imply that at all. Jesus simply "returned" to Galilee. (NIV)

John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. So Jesus wasn't "withdrawing" anywhere: He headed straight into the danger zone, taking up John's mission and John's message.

And Matthew – the gospel writer most intent on linking Jesus to Old Testament prophecy – knows that this area called Galilee holds all sorts of theological implications.

The passage opens with Jesus leaving his home in Nazareth and taking up residence in Capernaum. Capernaum lay on the northern tip of

the Sea of Galilee in a region that centuries before had been known as Naphtali.

Naphtali was one of the 12 sons of Jacob – along with Reuben and Judah and Joseph and Benjamin and other more well-known names.

When each son was given land, this region above the Sea of Galilee was given to the tribe of Naphtali.

His brother Zebulon's land lay just to the southwest of Naphtali's land.

These were war-torn lands. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah many centuries before had written about these lands: **“In the former time (God) brought into contempt the land of Zebulon 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.”** (Is. 9: 1a-2)

The gospel writer Matthew looks at Jesus' decision to move into Galilee – the ancient warring lands of Zebulun and Naphtali – and he remembers what Isaiah wrote. He interprets Jesus' move not as a random choice, but as a move prophesied years before for the Jewish Messiah.

Jesus is going into the ancient lands of Zebulun and Naphtali – now known as Galilee of the Gentiles – to bring light to people who sat in darkness.

And once he is there, what does he do? He proclaims, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

If those words sound familiar, it is because they were John the Baptist's identical words in the preceding chapter.

Somewhere along the way, we have weighted the word “repent” with all sorts of baggage. We think “sorry,” “regretful,” “wailing,” “sobbing,” “gnashing teeth.”

But the most important aspect of the word “repent” is not necessarily all that. The most important meaning of “repent” is to turn abruptly.

To abruptly change an attitude, a way of thinking, a behavior, a belief ... to another way.

A complete turnaround.

A 180-degree turn.

Caterpillar to butterfly.

*Turn abruptly, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Leave your cocoon for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

Now, when John the Baptist preached that same message back in chapter 3, he did link repentance to confessing sins. Scripture tells us that John baptized people in the Jordan River after they confessed their sins.

But Jesus doesn't go into all that. All we have in this passage is this:  
**“From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

*Turn around, abruptly, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

But how would that “repentance” look on the ground? The No. 1 rule for writers is *Don't tell me something. Show me.* So like all good writers, Matthew shows us repentance in action.

Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee and saw brothers Simon Peter and Andrew fishing. **“Follow me,”** he called, **“and I will make you fish for people.”**

I know I say this every time this Scripture passage rolls around in the lectionary. But if there's ever a case of political correctness run amok, this is it. Fish for people? No. The King James and NIV say, **“Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”** Fishermen will become fishers of men. Now that's poetry.

I have been criticized over the years for referring to God with masculine pronouns. Many people prefer statements like *God sent God's son*, rather than *God sent his son*. Or *God made God's self manifest*, rather than *God made himself manifest*.

My critics are absolutely theologically correct. God has no gender.  
But I'll go with the cadence, with the poetry, every time.

Look at how Andrew and Simon Peter responded to Jesus' invitation: "**Immediately they left their nets and followed him.**"

Matthew is using the call of the disciples to show what repentance looks like. Repentance looks like fishing one day, and following a wandering, nomadic rabbi the next.

Andrew and Peter left their nets, their means of livelihood, to follow Jesus.

And then like any good writer, Matthew ups the ante. Jesus goes next to James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They are in the boat with their father, mending nets. And when Jesus called them, "**Immediately they left the boat *and their father*, and followed him.**"

They left their means of livelihood – and their family – to follow Jesus.

Matthew tells the story in this sequence quite deliberately. He's building tension. He's building a case.

Jesus opened his ministry in the ancient land of Naphtali and Zebulun – just as Isaiah prophesied. He opened it in a land filled with darkness and the shadow of death.

And he opened it with a simple message, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

Andrew and Peter did just that, leaving their livelihood for an uncertain life on the road with this Messiah.

James and John did just that, leaving their livelihood – and their father – for an uncertain life on the road with this Messiah.

So what does repentance look like for us?

It looks like changing everything for an uncertain life on the road with this Messiah.

Now, depending on our pasts, it also can look like sorrow or regret for a life in which we knowingly have rejected God or hurt others.

It *can* look like a confession of sins and a move to baptism with water, as John the Baptist preached.

But it also can look like the repentance of Andrew and Peter, James and John. We have no evidence they were doing anything wrong or sinful before meeting Jesus. But upon meeting him, they turned to whole new lives.

And that's the main ingredient of repentance -- it is always, always, always going to include a turnaround in life choices.

Many of you know our rehab counselors, David Gay and Kreg Kimmons. In the past 14 years, they have sent 1,550 people into drug and alcohol treatment. They estimate that a third of them remain clean and sober and embarked on new lives in recovery.

That's repentance. That's a turnaround.

Many of you left big, comfortable churches to worship here. You are worshiping with a congregation that looks, to you, more like the

messianic banquet than a typical church gathering in Greenville, South Carolina.

That's a turnaround. That's repentance.

But I sense that many of you are still searching, still not sure what repentance fully looks like, but willing to explore, to seek, to push your boundaries, to challenge yourselves and your God. And I want you to know that your answers may come in the "being" as much as the "doing."

Our friend Jonathan Jones came to Greenville and to Triune after a career as a police officer in Kentucky and as a game warden in the Florida Everglades. He also came to us after spending a year "two steps ahead of the DEA." The Drug Enforcement Administration.

That's because Jonathan was a meth addict, and he knew enough about law enforcement to keep from being arrested.

He got clean in 2014, and he came to Greenville in an attempt to stay clean. After finding a worship home here, he began volunteering at our reception desk. He began teaching Bible study. But mostly, he began

seeking out people whom he felt needed someone to talk to, both in and outside Triune.

He has helped countless individuals by driving them to see apartments, helping them move furniture, helping them sign up for assistance, driving them to pay bills, checking in when they're hospitalized, all the mundane stuff of life. Quietly taking on what I call the ministry of presence, the ministry of being.

Which is exactly what he is offering at the end of our worship services now.

Not unlike Andrew and Simon Peter and James and John, he left his former life to take up a new life, sharing his experience of the kingdom of God.

In our lives, change rarely happens with the immediacy we see in the disciples' decisions to drop their nets and take up life as Jesus' roadies. We think and we ponder and we ask questions and we pray. And with no offense intended to the four fishermen, I think that's OK.

In fact, that's why we are offering the class *Discovering Your Sacred Gifts* that started Wednesday night. I hope it will give some of us time to think about our Christian callings in a warm and supportive community.

Matthew told his story of the disciples' radical turnabout to make a point about the radical nature of Jesus' ministry. Jesus did turn lives upside down and inside out. He still does.

If it's time for change in your life, time for your caterpillar to become a butterfly, time for repentance in the truest sense of the word, you might want to start by coming down to pray at the altar or talk with Jonathan. Or you can think about what it might mean to leave a dry and dusty cocoon for something new and glorious.

For one day on the seashore of an ancient land, Jesus said, "Follow me."

He says it still.

Amen.