

## THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | JANUARY 22, 2023

ISAIAH 9:1-4 | PSALM 27:1, 4-9 | 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-18 | MATTHEW 4:12-23

We're going to try something a little bit different today. It's just a little different, so don't panic. There's a practice called *Lectio Divina* that you may have heard of or done before. We've done it a handful of times together. But if you're unfamiliar, *Lectio Divina* means "sacred reading," and it's a way of reading scripture.

When we read a text from scripture, we often read it really fast and ask, "So what does it mean?" *Lectio Divina* invites us to slow down and reflect on the story by asking different questions of the text. And we're going to do that with today's gospel reading.

Usually, you would ask four questions, but we're going to make it a little simpler and keep it to three. First, what is going on in the story? If someone asked you to put it in your own words, what would you say? Second, what does the story tell us about God? What do we learn about God's character or action through the text? And third, what does the story tell us about ourselves? What does this text teach me about my life and the life of my community?

First, what is going on in the text itself? A while back, somebody—I think it was Bill Joseph or Diane Stelling—sent me a cartoon that showed three students taking an exam, with two of the students craning their necks to look at the other student's test. And the caption below the picture read, "The Writing of the Gospels."

It's funny because a significant portion of Matthew's gospel is material he borrowed from Mark. And yet, even when Matthew tells a story from Mark, he makes a little change to it. Where Mark's Jesus preaches about the kingdom of *God*, Matthew's Jesus preaches about the kingdom of *heaven*. Why the change? Our best—but not entirely satisfying<sup>1</sup>—estimation is that Matthew—a Jewish writer writing for a Jewish audience—was honoring the convention of not using God's name. So wherever Mark used "kingdom of God," Matthew used some editorial discretion and swapped in "kingdom of heaven."

Matthew's first readers probably wouldn't have gotten hung up on this, but it can be a little confusing for us. In our cultural imagination, "heaven" usually refers to a place. But for Matthew, "heaven" is a shorthand for the presence of God and God's ways of being.<sup>2</sup> This sounds weird, but it makes sense when you read it in context. When Jesus proclaims, "The kingdom of heaven has come near," in today's gospel reading, you can read that as, "God and God's ways of being have come near." And why have they come near? Because Jesus is present within and among us.

So what is happening in the story? Jesus is beginning his public ministry. And he is beginning it by announcing that the kingdom of heaven—the fullness of God's presence and God's ways of being—are arriving.

Second, what does this story tell us about God? In the world that this text was written in, the Roman Empire was the kingdom. It was the defining political, social, and economic reality. When someone used the phrase "good news," *euangelion* in the Greek, it would have been a messenger telling you about a military victory or territorial expansion for

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<sup>1</sup> Not entirely satisfying because Matthew uses "God" in other places.

<sup>2</sup> See Paula Gooder, *Heaven* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

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the Roman Empire. It was good news for somebody, but if you were a first century fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, that somebody probably wasn't you.

So when Jesus begins his ministry by announcing the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near, it's meant to be a little tongue-in-cheek. Unlike the good news of Caesar that only brings more oppression, the good news of Jesus brings liberation and healing.

Jesus, Matthew tells us, "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." Matthew identifies the kingdom of heaven not just as something purely spiritual (teaching people how to pray) and not just some physical improvement (giving people bread). But as the healing, reconciliation, and peace of God's people. God's desire is to remove every obstacle, every barrier, every hindrance that keeps us from flourishing and wholeness.

So what does this story tell us about God? That God acts on behalf of the sick, the hungry, the ostracized, and the vulnerable. In the life of Jesus, God acts *for us*.

And third, what does this have to do with us? Well, one of the first things you notice in this story of Jesus's ministry is that it involves other people. When God acts in the world, God acts not by overpowering other people but by involving them.

In this story, God's action involves Simon, Andrew, James, and John. These were people who were, to put it mildly, unremarkable. Of the top of our heads, how many other first-century fishermen can we name? Few if any. And to these unremarkable people, Jesus gives a remarkable invitation: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Jesus invites them to be a part of what he is doing. To live as signs of Jesus's liberating and life-giving work that draw people into the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus gives Simon, Andrew, James, and John new identities as fishers of men. And this new identity isn't something they come up with themselves. It's not a project or an agenda that they have. We don't make ourselves fishers of men. Jesus does. So they don't need to worry about whether their lives have purpose or meaning or value to them.

And it's the same for us. When you hear this story, don't just take it to mean, "Simon, Andrew, James, John, *and nobody else*." You should read it as "Simon, Andrew, James, John, Gavin, Susan, Lisa, and Bill." And not only does Jesus call to each of us, but Jesus calls each of us from where we are in language that we understand. So maybe Jesus is not making you a fisher of men, but he is making you a builder of the house of God or a cook of God's great banquet or a caretaker of God's people.

So what do we learn about ourselves? Ordinary people from seemingly pedestrian stations of life, gathered together through the Holy Spirit, are the means by which God's will is done. When we live our vocations in the world, we are signs of God's good news.

We celebrate that every time we remember our baptisms, gather at Christ's meal, and are sent to service to God's meal. When we trust that wherever the body of Christ is, God's kingdom draws near, we see our own ordinary lives overflowing with God's mercy and grace, and life on earth becomes a little more like it is in heaven.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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