

Jan. 22 23, 2011
Matthew 4:12 – 33
The World Looks Different

Today's reading is the first time in the gospel of Matthew of Jesus acting as an independent agent, a leader in his own right. We've had a chapter of birth story, lots of intrigue with Herod and Egypt and the magi, and some good time with John the Baptist, including Jesus' own baptism. And the beginning of chapter four tells of Jesus' time in the wilderness, being tempted, and clarifying what his motivations are and are not. The first verse of today's reading is very important. It's not just information. I learned in my readings this week that in the gospel of Matthew, whenever we hear that Jesus "withdrew," it means there has been some kind of threat to his work. In this case, he's heard of John the Baptist's arrest. He knows that Herod is on a tear, so he heads north, to Galilee, where someone else is in charge, and begins his solo ministry there. Jesus didn't go into hiding. He didn't give up. He made a wise move, and forged ahead, gathering disciples. He went down to the docks and looked for some hard-working fishermen and recruited them.

Today's gospel reading does what I've told you Matthew spends a lot of time doing; proving to the Jewish audience of Matthew's day, that Jesus was indeed the Jewish messiah, and was fulfilling, in this case, Isaiah's prophecy. Then in verse 17, we get the chorus line for Matthew's gospel, the line that gets repeated over and over, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

It may seem odd to you, but for me the trip from Carbondale to Evansville is completely different than the trip from Evansville to Carbondale. And no, I don't take a different route. It's the same stretch of road each way. But turning around makes it completely different. I used to go hiking on weekends with a group of friends. After we'd met at the agreed upon home, piled into the designated car, we'd decide where to go. There are so many good trails in southern Illinois: Rocky Bluff, Kinkaid Lake, Giant City, Panther's Den. There's one person in the group who all but refused to do trails that aren't a loop. She says she hates coming back the same way she started. She thinks it's boring. I don't mind at all. For me when we take a trail that doesn't loop, when we turn around, it might as well be a new trail. Things look very different after you turn around.

That's what Jesus was asking people to do in today's gospel reading. He was asking them to see their familiar world in a completely different way. To repent, literally means to turn around. I imagine that most of us, when we hear Jesus say "repent," what we're hearing is, "Confess all your sins right now, ask God's forgiveness, because the end of the world is coming soon and you'd better get forgiven or you'll go to hell." That's not what Jesus meant at all. He was talking to individuals and to organized Judaism as a whole, to Israel. What he meant was "Turn your life around. The way your living isn't always as God asked you. God's hopes for you and for this world are right here, waiting for you to grab hold. You'll be amazed at how differently the world looks if you just turn around and see God all around you." And the phrase, "the kingdom of heaven has come near" or the "the kingdom of God is at hand" does not mean that the world is about to end. It means, "Hey you, wake up and smell the coffee. God is alive and well and all around you. Open your eyes and your heart. There are glimpses of God, of the culture of God all around you, and if you'd lend your life, there'd be even more. Get busy!"

It's a powerful message for each of us and for the church. And in an interim time. And on an annual meeting Sunday as you look back on your work in 2010, and ahead to 2011. The interim time is a time of repentance, of turning around to see your church from a different perspective, listening for what God is calling you to do and be. Looking for glimpses of heaven around you. Talking about repenting as turning around sounds more positive than what you may be used to. But I don't know if it's any easier – to see our familiar world in a new way is pretty tough to do. It's not like my trip to work or a hike. Turning your life around is lots harder. It fascinates me that Peter and Andrew, then James and John, immediately put down their work and followed Jesus. Immediately, they turned their lives around. I don't know about you, but too often when I hear God calling me, I've got to think long and hard about turning my life around to accommodate God's call. This repentance stuff is hard.

In the start of this new year, how might God be calling you to repent, to turn around and see God's presence around you? In this annual meeting weekend, how might God be calling Bethlehem UCC to repent, to turn around, to see things differently, to refresh our ministry and mission and worship? To make sure we notice that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and that we're part of making that happen.

Loren Mead, a pastor who helps denominations and churches move toward the future, says in his book [Transforming Congregations for the Future](#), "I think the task of the local congregation is to help ordinary people become engaged in that mystery of God's call and God's grace, people

willing to make the leap from the known to the unknown as the apostle Peter did; people who act on the basis of the new society, who claim the power of that kingdom, who act for peace, and justice, and love and healing.” Is Bethlehem church helping ordinary people hear the call and get involved like those 4 disciples did this morning?

Just this past week we celebrated Martin Luther King’s birthday. Talk about God calling and asking you to turn your life around. He was a recently graduated pastor, serving a congregation, with no intention of leading a national movement, let alone getting killed for following God’s call for human rights. Last week we ordained elders and deacons elected by the congregation to serve on church council. They were called, by the nominating committee, by God, and by you. They said “yes.” That’s a lot less dramatic call than the disciples, or prophets like King. But the call to serve your church or to serve at home or at work by doing what God gave you gifts to do – those are all calls to discipleship. May today’s gospel reading make us all take some time to listen for Jesus’ call to us to follow him. Many of us, if we take that time for reflection, may conclude, that yes, we are being faithful to Jesus. We are serving as best we can. Some of us may be honest enough to say we’ve been avoiding Jesus’ call, and we need to turn our lives around, see the world in a different way, to be faithful to Jesus.

Today Jesus has asked us to turn around, to see the world differently, to see God’s way. He asks us if we are living as if God’s kingdom really is at hand. Or in our tiredness and stuckness of doing things the way we’ve always done them, are we missing Jesus’ call. We often don’t realize that the same path can be refreshing, look lots different if we simply turn around, if we catch Jesus’ vision of God’s way for us. In this season of Epiphany, when that star is still shining over Jesus, may we see the presence of God working in our lives, in our church, calling us to repent, to turn our lives around and see everything in a totally new way, and Jesus’ asking us to call others to that way. Arise and shine. Our light has come. Let’s make sure we’ve repented, turned around, and are following the light of Christ.