

THE KINGDOM OF SALVATION

Matthew 4:12-25

Third Sunday in Epiphany (Series A)

January 22, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *the Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 4, verses 12 through 15. This is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In this passage he reveals the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 4, beginning at verse 12, we read in Jesus' name.

¹² Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
on them a light has dawned."

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

¹⁸ While walking 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. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Suppose there were a kingdom where the king gets everything he wants. Would that be a good kingdom or a bad kingdom? His subjects may or may not agree with everything, but the king still does whatever he wants. He's open to requests. In fact, he listens to every request. But then he does what he wants. And he does not take advice. He has no advisors. And anyone who

THE KINGDOM OF SALVATION (Matthew 4:12-25)

tries to advise him is liable to get a sharp rebuke. The king does what he wants. And everything in his kingdom is exactly how he wants it to be. Now, is this a good kingdom or a bad kingdom?

It depends. It depends on whether or not the king is always right. It depends on whether or not what he wants is good for his subjects. If the king is selfish, then it would be a bad kingdom. If the king is foolishly arrogant, presuming that he always knows best, when he really doesn't, then it would be a bad kingdom. But if the king is gracious and humble in the sense that he cares more about his subjects than he does about himself, and if he really does know best all of the time, then this would be a really good kingdom.

I am talking about the kingdom of heaven, and I am talking about Jesus. He really does know everything, and he always does what he wants. And this is good, because he wants what is good for his subjects above everything else.

There is a lot going on in this text. There are three, or maybe four, sections that could all stand on their own. But they're bound together by this theme of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is not so much a place, as it is the activity of the king. Wherever Jesus is present, doing what he does, that's where the kingdom is. The kingdom of heaven is simply the reign of Jesus, and he reigns wherever he is.

This text is a major transition in *The Gospel of Matthew*. It's the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The first three and half chapters are sort of an introduction to Jesus' ministry. We've read quite a bit of it over the last month or so, but the readings jump around a little bit in a non-chronological order to fit with the seasons of the church year. And there's even a part of the introduction that we won't read until we get to Lent. So a lot of this will be familiar to you if you've been here the last month or two. But I think it might be helpful to review it in Chronological order.

During Christmas, we read about the birth of Jesus in Matthew 1. Then, in chapter 2, Magi from the east came to worship Jesus. Then Joseph takes Mary and Joseph to Egypt to escape from the evil King Herod, who wanted to kill the infant Jesus. When the family returned, Joseph settled them in Nazareth. Chapter three fasts forward about thirty years. Before the public is introduced to Jesus, John the baptizer appears. We heard about this way back in Advent. John baptized people and told them to believe in the one coming after him. Then we see Jesus again when he comes to be baptized by John. We heard about that two weeks ago. Then Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted for forty days. That's the part we'll hear in Lent.

And apparently, while Jesus was in the wilderness, John was arrested by King Herod, not the same Herod that tried to kill the infant Jesus, but one of his sons. The children took after their father. So Jesus withdrew into the region of Galilee. This is the first section of today's gospel lesson.

Galilee is the northern region of Israel. Most of what we were just talking about, John's ministry, the baptism of Jesus, and Jesus' temptation were all closer to the southern region of Judea. Or, to be more precise, all of that was just across the Jordan River, east of Judea. So when Jesus came back from the wilderness, instead of starting his ministry in Judea, he went back to Galilee.

Now Judea, the southern region, was really the heart and soul of Israel. The capitol city of Jerusalem was there. And Jerusalem was home to the temple, which was the religious center and the pride of Israel. It would have been a predictable place for the Messiah to reveal himself. But instead of going to Jerusalem, he goes back to the region he grew up in: Galilee. But instead of

settling in Nazareth, the town he grew up in, he moved to Capernaum, which was right on the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew says this was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. We heard this from the Old Testament lesson today (Is. 9:1-4).

- 15 “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
16 the people dwelling in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
on them a light has dawned” (Matt. 4:15-16).

Now Zebulun and Naphtali were among the twelve tribes of Israel. And they were certainly among the lesser known tribes. Their territory was in the north, along the western shores of the Sea of Galilee. But, about 700 years before Jesus was born, all of the northern tribes were taken captive and scattered into foreign nations, where they were assimilated into other cultures and religions, and they basically became gentiles. So by Jesus’ time, the Israelites living in the region of Galilee were mostly from the tribe of Judah. Zebulun and Naphtali were gone, swallowed up by the gentiles. The word “gentiles,” by the way, simply means “nations.” From the perspective of the Jews, a gentile was someone from any other nation.

So there were Jews living on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, but the eastern side was occupied by gentiles. And the Sea of Galilee isn’t really that big. From north to south, it’s only about twelve miles long. And east to west, it’s only about six miles wide. So it’s more like a big lake. There wasn’t a lot to separate the Jews from the gentiles.

That’s the region of Galilee. This is where Jesus began his ministry. Instead of beginning in Jerusalem with the elite Jews, he went to Israel’s backwater region. There were Jews living in Galilee, but the Israelites who once settled there were long gone, and they had Gentile neighbors not too far away. And when Jesus settled there, it fulfilled the prophecy from Isaiah. Light had come to the gentiles, even to those lost tribes of Israel that had been scattered among the gentiles.

A few weeks ago I mentioned that Matthew’s gospel was written more for a Jewish audience. But that doesn’t mean he wrote to placate the Jews. This would have been at least a little bit offensive to them. Before the Messiah appears in Jerusalem, he appears in Galilee, and he even goes to the gentiles before coming to Jerusalem. It would be one thing if he appeared in Jerusalem first, and then eventually got around to visiting the Gentiles. But he begins on the margins of Israel. He draws people from beyond those margins, and he crosses the border to go to them. This reveals that his kingdom is for the entire world.

A good way for us to think of gentiles today is as outsiders. Jesus is concerned for those who are outside his Kingdom or outside his Church. He wants to save them. He wants to bring them into his kingdom. He is the Light for the entire world. That’s what we see when he begins his ministry in Galilee.

The second section of this Gospel lesson is Jesus’ preaching. He said, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”** (4:17). It’s interesting; this is word-for-word identical to what John the baptizer preached (3:2). Jesus didn’t come preaching anything new. He preached the truth, just as John before him had preached the truth. This one sentence, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,”** is really a summary of their preaching. They called sinners, both Jews and gentiles, to repent. And the reason is that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. Another way of saying that is that Jesus, the King of heaven and earth, had come. With Jesus, the

THE KINGDOM OF SALVATION (Matthew 4:12-25)

Kingdom of Heaven had come to earth. The Light of heaven had come down. Therefore, God calls sinners everywhere to repent.

Back in December, during the season of Advent, as we considered John's preaching, we talked about the word "repentance." So I won't repeat everything. But I want to review, so that you remember. Repentance does not mean that we clean up our lives or turn ourselves around. If we could do that, we wouldn't need Jesus. Repentance means that we turn from sin and unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ. It doesn't mean that we finally improve ourselves. It doesn't mean that we get ourselves right with God. We can't do that. When we try, we only fail, and then we feel like hiding from God. But repentance means laying everything bare and trusting in Jesus for salvation. Repentance consists of two parts: contrition and faith. It means that we confess our sins, and we believe that God forgives us for the sake of Jesus. That's repentance. Jesus wants us to acknowledge our sins so that we would be forgiven and enter into his kingdom.

The third section of this Gospel lesson is Jesus calling four of his disciples: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Peter and Andrew were brothers, as were James and John. And they were all fishermen. Jesus calls them to follow him, and they do. They become his disciples and apostles. A disciple is a follower or a learner. It means that they learned from Jesus. And an apostle is someone who is sent. Jesus called these men so that he could send them out to preach this gospel of the kingdom. Jesus did this because he wants the whole world to be saved. He wants you to be saved. He wants you to live in his kingdom. So he called, Peter, Andrew, James, and John to a different kind of fishing. Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he'll eat for a lifetime. Make a man a fisher of men, and they'll all feast forever in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus wants to be known. The Light of the world wants to be seen. The King wants his Kingdom to be filled. So Jesus called these apostles and sent them into the world, and he continues to call and send preachers around the world. It's all about building up his kingdom for the good of his subjects.

The fourth section of this Gospel lesson gives us a picture of salvation and a sample of Jesus' kingdom. "He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people" (4:23). And, naturally, Jesus became quite famous. That's what happens when you perform miracles. So his fame spread well beyond Galilee. We see more about the inclusion of the gentiles here. Syria was a nation of gentiles. The Decapolis was the gentile region across the Sea of Galilee. There were more gentiles beyond the Jordan River. People from all over, including Jews from Jerusalem and Judea, came to Jesus. Jesus welcomed people from every nation on earth into his kingdom.

And he gave them a taste of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. He preached to them the good news of the Kingdom, and he healed their diseases. It was a taste of the Kingdom.

We talk a lot about the forgiveness of sins here, and rightly so. This is the first part of salvation. God forgives your sins because Jesus paid for them "with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death" (*Luther's Small Catechism*, "The Apostles' Creed"). But salvation is more than just forgiveness. Forgiveness brings us into so much more. It's not just about what God takes away. It's also about what God gives to you in place of your sin. Salvation encompasses your entire body and soul. Salvation is your entire being, both body and

THE KINGDOM OF SALVATION (Matthew 4:12-25)

soul, being right in God's creation. It means that your body and soul are exactly how Jesus wants them to be.

This is what we will experience in the Kingdom of Heaven, and this is what Jesus gave a sample of when he healed every disease and affliction. He wanted people to know what his kingdom is like. Now remember, and this is very important: the healing those people experienced was just a sample. It wasn't intended to be the whole deal. It's more like the free samples you might get at the grocery store on Saturdays. It's just enough to give you a taste of what the real thing is like. If you get a sample of something really great at the grocery store, it would be foolish to just come back every Saturday in hopes of getting another sample. You should just buy the real thing.

So it's important to know that those healings Jesus performed in Galilee were just a sample, so that we do not crave the sample instead of the real thing. The thing about those healings is that all of those people eventually got sick again and died. The point of those healings was to look forward to something greater. Jesus was teaching us what his Kingdom is like.

In his Kingdom, he gets what he wants. Another way to say that is that he gets what he desires. Or his perfect will reigns supreme over everything. And Jesus' will and desire is this: that you, as a complete person of body and soul, would be exactly how he created you to be. He created you to be morally perfect. That is, he created you to always do what is right and always have joy in what is right. And he created you to be physically perfect. That is, he created your body to not get sick, and not get hurt, but to feel and function perfectly. And in Jesus' Kingdom, he gets what he wants. His will reigns supreme.

Now, Jesus kingdom has come to this earth. But sin and death also reign in this earth. We experience conflicting kingdoms. And for a time, Jesus allows both of these kingdoms to exist side-by-side, because he desires for all people to come to repentance and enter his Kingdom of Salvation. So we do not yet experience the fullness of the Kingdom of Salvation.

And we might be discouraged by this. We might want more of the Kingdom of Salvation know. We want more righteousness in the world, and we want more healing in the world. And this is good. It means were longing for the Kingdom of Salvation. But we might be discouraged to learn that we have to wait. That's one way to think about it. But we should really be encouraged by this thought. If we have to wait now, it means that whatever bliss we experience in this life is only a fraction of the perfect bliss we will experience in the new creation.

So Jesus gives us a sample or a picture of it now, so that we can know that this salvation is real. There really is a Kingdom where righteousness, peace, and health permeate every cell and molecule of that world. There really is a Kingdom where Jesus' gets everything he wants. And what he wants is for you to live there in perfect bliss forever. This is his Kingdom of Salvation. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.