

Matthew 4:12-25 - July 25, 2021
"The Love of God Has Dawned"
8:15am & 11:00am Morning Services
Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA
Pastor Nathaniel H. Gutiérrez

Matt. 4:12 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:

Matt. 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. 4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matt. 4:18 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.

Matt. 4:23 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Let's pray together.

God's love is on mission to save those dying in darkness

One of the most powerful and well-known stories in Scripture is the story of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho. We read of how the armies of Israel marched around the city of Jericho for seven days. Then, after the trumpet sounded and all the Israelites shouted, God made the walls come tumbling down!

One writer poses an interesting question: “God won the battle while Joshua and his army stood by and watched in amazement. Considering the extraordinary means by which the Lord defeated Jericho—with no military strategy required from Joshua and his army—why were spies sent into the city?” [Kelly]

James Montgomery Boice argues that God had Joshua send in the spies to Jericho in order to accomplish *His mission* of saving Rahab the prostitute.

He writes, “it is reasonable to think that the spies are sent to save Rahab and not merely to bring information. Joshua *did not need information about Jericho*; what he needed were the arrangements for saving Rahab and her family.”

The account of Rahab in Joshua 2 shows us the heart of the Lord we serve, a Lord who is gracious and compassionate. Who cares about just one individual. While the entire city was devoted to certain death and destruction, the Lord went above and beyond on his mission to save the life of a Gentile prostitute and her family. And he found her in unrighteousness, unfaithfulness, and darkness, but saved her according to his great mercy and grace. God's mission is to save the lost and broken.

The story of Rahab shows us a clear picture of God's heart. *And*, it sets the context of the theme of the passage we are examining today. Because in this passage, we see the same themes displayed:

Jesus' love goes above and beyond to pursue the lost and living in darkness. To those broken and those living in shame. To the people dwelling in darkness, he brings the love and hope of the gospel.

And we see this theme come into play right away in our text. Matthew quoting from the prophecies of the book of Isaiah, writes, that the Messiah, the “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” [Isa. 9] would bring hope to the cities of Zebulun, Naphtali, and Galilee of the Gentiles.

Commentators have a very grim way of describing these cities. The areas were known to be made up primarily of unbelievers or “heathen Gentiles”.

Leon Morris writes for example, “The people in mind [here] are those *whose horizon is bounded by death*. Death is a tyrant and their whole life is lived in its shadow, subject to its nearness, under its threat.” [Morris, 81]

And Morris is right, because that is exactly how the Scriptures describe the people in these cities.

*“...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.”*

The people Jesus chose to minister to first, were those dwelling in darkness and all that it includes - sin, shame, guilt, and death.

It is crucial that we see what Jesus' mission was here. Jesus came for those who were far from him. He cared intimately about those living in darkness and came to bring them into life through the light of the gospel.

In this we see God's love for those in darkness, and in this next section we also see God's love for the forgotten and the outcast and those living in shame.

God's love is for those who live in shame

Now, it may be too soon, but over the past year a few things have become taboo because of COVID. One of those things is sneezing in public. If you have happened to sneeze in public during this past year, you most certainly have received the glares and shaking heads from those around you. It isn't hard to imagine what the people around you might be thinking.

If you had to quarantine because of a possible case of COVID, you remember the fear in people's eyes when they learned and quickly stepped back from you hoping not to get what you might possibly have.

It was a natural reaction, but for those experiencing that reaction, it was hurtful. It was as if people were yelling out “Unclean! Unclean!” as they ran for their lives.

We can joke some now, but it was a serious matter a few months ago when we knew so much less about the virus.

And at the time this gospel letter was written, there were many diseases that had no known cure. People who were sick and afflicted with various diseases, or who were paralyzed or who had epilepsy and they were considered the pariahs of society. No one wanted to be near them or be associated with them.

People considered those with such diseases “unclean” and believed their illnesses to be directly associated with particular sins they or their parents had committed. Couple that with the fear that they themselves might contract said illness, they avoided them “like the plague.”

But here again, we see the heart of the gospel Jesus was proclaiming. He wasn't going to the healthy, to the educated, to the powerful and rich in Jerusalem. He was going to the broken, the outcast, and the sick. To the lowly, the fishermen, and the forgotten.

While we served in Peru with Mission to the World, we would occasionally host Medical Missions Clinics with American doctors. We would take these pop-up clinics to underserved and remote areas - to the people who could not benefit from the hospitals and clinics in the cities. It was very common that on the first day of clinic, before we would arrive to set up at 7am, there would be hundreds of people lined up around the block waiting to be helped. News would travel fast, and we would have even more people coming the next day. To see the pain and suffering these people went through and the many miles they would travel on foot to be seen by these doctors was astounding.

I cannot even begin to imagine what it must have been like when Jesus came to town. How the people who had hidden themselves throughout the regions in shame and embarrassment must have travelled from far distances to be attended and seen by the one person who would not only welcome them, but could heal *all* their diseases.

And that is what Jesus did. Instead of protecting or preserving his life, Jesus lay down his life and healed those who had been rejected. Rather than avoid them, he sought after those who literally lived in what one commentator described as, "a territory assigned to death." [Morris, 82]

J.C. Ryle reminds us that these miracles were meant to be types and emblems of our Lord's skill as a spiritual physician. "He, before whom no bodily disease proved incurable, is mighty to cure every ailment of [the soul]." [Ryle] Jesus' love brought hope to the hopeless.

God's love is for every day

When I was five years old, and my sister Lois was eleven years old, I remember her sitting me down on the living room couch for a serious talk. She often had talks with me about Jesus and about salvation and this day, she asked if I was saved. I told her I wasn't sure, and she asked if I wanted to go to heaven. I responded "Um, yeah!" and she helped me to say the sinner's prayer. It was a sweet moment and I'll cherish it and always be grateful to my sister for caring so much about me and my salvation.

Some of you might remember a time you offered such a prayer. Or when you helped someone else offer a similar prayer. (It is a common practice in many evangelical circles and one that I implemented a lot overseas).

It is an important prayer, and in many ways a good prayer, and yet I think it would be wise to offer a caution with it as we think about this prayer and how we connect it to the gospel.

The caution is that I think it has become a common practice in Evangelical circles to reduce the gospel to a prayer or a conversion. To a single moment in time when someone prays a prayer of repentance and trusts in Jesus for salvation.

Now, don't get me wrong, a sinner's conversion is a miraculous and essential work of the Spirit in salvation. But I think there is a problem, when in our hearts we reduce the message of the gospel to a conversion moment. And the reason is because the gospel is so much more than a moment.

Jesus' love is more than a moment. We need it more than just for conversion, we need the gospel every single day. And Jesus came so *that we might live by the gospel*.

My wife and I have been married 16 years now. We were married in this very spot here below and I was so thankful to have my Grandfather Harry Marshall, my Father Gerry and Pastor Rayburn officiate and participate in the ceremony together. We were one of those couples who wanted ALL of our friends up here. So, we had 9 groomsmen and 9 bridesmaids on each side, including two flower girls and three pastors! It was a full house!

Now, there was a moment in that ceremony where Alicia and I became husband and wife. We said our vows, and then we were declared husband and wife.

We were married at that moment. We were "converted," if you will, into a married couple.

How strange would it be though, if after that moment we only referred to our marriage in the past tense. As that moment in the ceremony that took place right there below. The moment when we said our vows and we were declared married?

That would be really strange. Because marriage is much more than vows and a declaration, it is walking together and living together. It is living out our vows and our lives together.

And I think that that is how we *ought* to consider our relationship with the gospel. Our relationship with the gospel is not a moment in time, but a life of living with Jesus. It is our daily walk with Jesus as we seek to follow him, and he patiently and lovingly extends his forgiveness and grace to us as we seek to follow him.

In v. 17, we see Jesus apply this. Jesus began his preaching ministry with the words, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" and in the very next verse we see him walking by the sea of Galilee and calling two brothers, Andrew and Peter, James, and John *to follow him*.

Jesus' idea of gospel repentance was, "*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*" These men were called to join Jesus in his mission of *living in the gospel* and bringing people into that same gospel. It was a life-long calling of learning, growing, following, and obeying.

The message Jesus brought was good news *for ALL of life*, not only for the spiritual moment of conversion.

And we will understand more of that as we continue to read on in the gospel of Matthew, because in the very next chapter, we will come upon the famous Sermon on the Mount. The sermon where Jesus applies the good news of the gospel into many teachings of practical, everyday living.

Where Jesus shows his church how they ought to live and how the gospel applies to every area of life. God's love and the gospel is lived out every day. His mercies are new every morning.

This is the beauty of the love of God. His love isn't there just to get us "in the door of heaven." His love is there to help us, to sustain us, to encourage us, and strengthen us in his grace. The gospel shows us that his love is there when we stumble and when we fall. Our God is a forgiving and compassionate God, and he gives us that compassion every single day.

While it is true that the gospel is the gift of the good news that brings us out of darkness into the light, we must also remember that it is the gift of good news *that sustains us every single day*.

God's love is for you today

Not too long ago, I read of the story of two Wycliffe Bible Translators who had been working on translating the gospel of Matthew for a small tribe in Papua New Guinea.

Most likely in an attempt to jump straight into the meat of the gospel, they decided to skip the first seventeen verses of Matthew, saving the translation of the genealogy of Jesus to the end and giving the other sections out to the tribe as they translated it. But they didn't have the interest they had hoped for.

When they finally finished the translation, they worked on the seventeen verses they had skipped. When the tribal translator began to help them translate these verses, he became very serious and invited the missionaries to a special meeting. It was at that meeting that he asked them to read those missing seventeen verses out loud to the tribe. The missionary was very concerned at the silence and heaviness in the room.

When they completed its reading, the natives demanded, 'Why didn't you tell us all this before?'

The missionary was shocked. He didn't think the genealogy of Jesus would matter to them.

But their responses said otherwise, "No-one bothers to write down the ancestors of spirit beings.'It's only real people who record their genealogical table,' another added.

'Jesus must be a real person!' someone else cried, his voice ringing with astonishment. 'Jesus must have been a real man on this earth then. He's not just white man's magic.' 'Then what the mission has taught us is real.' (Oates, 205-207)

The whole translation of the book of Matthew and the Gospel of Jesus didn't matter to this tribe until the genealogy had been translated. It was then that they knew it was real and could trust in it and believe it.

As we consider these verses today, I fear that we might be tempted to hold a similar perspective as this tribe did. To consider the gospel as sweet and wonderful story, of a reality we lived once long ago. Something that is interesting, but not real. At least not real to us anymore.

This would be a tremendous loss. For Jesus' ministry is an active ministry. It is real for us today.

Jesus teaches us by his word that he has come to bring life into this world for all who would trust in him. A light that overcomes all the darkness in our heart – at conversion, but also afterwards.

Jesus teaches that his love is for all those who feel shame and fear, and he is reminding us that he has come to heal the broken and the ashamed.

And he reminds us that we need him every hour.

Practically, how does this work out? What does this mean to us?

If you do not know Jesus and are living in darkness far from him, consider what Jesus has done in your life to bring you close to him. Consider for a moment all the ways in which Jesus has provided opportunities for you. How he has loved you and provided for you. How he has brought you to listen to this message even today.

See how he has gone above and beyond to extend his love to you. How he has provided you with many opportunities to see the beauty of his love, and to turn and follow him. He is not only real, but he is a God on mission seeking to save those who are lost and far from him. He offers you life everlasting and says, "Repent today, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

And there are many believers here as well, who are struggling with shame, or fear or anxiety. Many today who are hiding their pain behind an appearance of strength or happiness or laughter, but feel discouraged and beaten down.

There are those among us who strive to find joy in this life, but are crushed by the weight of bad health. Your burden is heavy, and the pain is intolerable. And you are so overwhelmed by it all. You feel forgotten or discouraged by the constant struggle.

Others of you who are here who have tried to do everything within your power to be a good husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter, and no matter how hard you have tried, you have failed repeatedly. You break their hearts, and you break your own heart in the process. You've tried to change, but you keep on failing in the same ways. The weight of it all is so heavy, and you just want to give up.

Or maybe your struggle isn't with something you have done, or something you are experiencing, but rather with who you are or where you are in life. You haven't achieved or

obtained the desires of your heart. You are afraid and ashamed of who you are, and hope that no one will see the real you.

Maybe it is your past, something you have done, or something that has been done to you. Maybe it is something you can't fix, but it still weighs heavily on you and crushes your spirit as you continue to wrestle with it.

"Do you bear the weight of a dark and shameful past? Do your former sins taunt you with the lie that surely you must be a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God?" [Kelly]

Brothers and sisters, these struggles are so heavy, and we have only spoken of them generally. There are so many personal, specific, and deep-seated struggles within each and every one of us.

And it is for that reason that we must know and experience that the gospel is real. The gospel is not just a past reality for our conversion, but an every-present, daily need for us.

As we go through the shame of our struggles, our heavy burdens and sins in the past and present, we must remember that the Jesus didn't zoom into our lives and zoom out after conversion, but he promised to be with us always even to the end of the age. His grace was not just to get us into the door of heaven, but it continues to be poured out over us as we struggle to follow him here on this earth.

The same God who went to great lengths to spare a prostitute like Rahab and to forgive and cover over her shame, is the same God today who goes to great lengths to heal and give us grace and compassion with our many struggles and who cares intimately about our needs. He heals our shame and carries our burdens.

J.C. Ryle says, "These miracles show Jesus' heart. He is a most compassionate Savior. He refused no one, he had an ear to hear, and his compassion does not fail. [Ryle, 31]

There is no broken heart that He cannot heal; there is no wound of conscience that he cannot cure. Fallen, crushed, bruised, plague-stricken as we all are by sin, Jesus by his blood and spirit can make us whole." [Ryle, 30-31]

Therefore, plant yourself in God's word daily that you may be reminded of his gospel for your daily life. For it is in his Word that we taste and see that the mercies of God are new every morning. Amen.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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