

Sermon for January 22, 2023 by The Rev. Lydia Gajdel
Third Sunday after Epiphany Year A
St. Paul and the Redeemer Episcopal Church – Chicago, Illinois

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Mother of us all.

My first job out of seminary, I served as a Youth Minister, a time in which I learned more about the Bible from talking to 7 year olds than I ever did from my professors (something I probably shouldn't say out loud because this is Hyde Park.) One Sunday, I was wandering around the classrooms during Sunday school and I poked my head in to find a huddle of boys deep in conversation in the corner. As I walked over and sat down, I realized that they were comparing punishments of what their parents would do to them. One would be grounded for a month. The other would lose all their video games. And I'm over here thinking what does this have to do with Sunday School when one of the them turns to me and says, "This Zebedee guy was probably really mad, wasn't he?" And there we had it. Reading the calling of the first disciples, this group of kids was stuck on the fact that these guys had just left their dad doing all the work. So, in honesty all I could answer was, "Yeah, I'd probably be mad too."

But they were right. It's wild. Simon and Andrew, James and John, they all just up and leave. Following this stranger out into the countryside with seemingly no thought for where they are going or what they are leaving behind. This is sort of crazy. But, let's take a step back.

We find Jesus this morning re-entering the world after 40 days and 40 nights in the desert with the devil. He has been tempted with all of the power this world can offer, told to prove himself as the son of God, given every opportunity to succumb to his most basic instincts. And when he wanders back into society, we are told that he is famished. When I envision this moment, this

triumphant return, I imagine a Jesus who is a little bit of a mess.

And then, boom. His ministry begins. There is no spa weekend. No vacation. No break. Jesus emerges from the desert and immediately there is work to be done. The kingdom of God has come near.

Matthew grounds the beginning of Jesus's ministry in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah.

...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.

Something is happening. Change is upon us. For generations we have wandered, unable to truly see the world around us. And slowly but surely, the dawn is breaking and light is flooding in. Matthew uses the words of Isaiah to point at Jesus and say, look. Here is the one. This is the change of which we were told.

And with that introduction, the ministry of Jesus begins. But not on its own. Not an independent explosion or joyful burst. Or even a change that happens to us, with Jesus as the catalyst. The first thing we hear out Jesus's mouth is, "Repent. The kingdom of God is near." Immediately we are implicated. Jesus is saying here is what is happening. The kingdom of God is making itself known to you. And you have something to do. You are invited, if not required, to act. This change is happening in your world. And you simply cannot stay the same in the face of it.

With that frame, the calling of the first disciples doesn't seem so wild. Jesus comes across these men just living their lives, fishing, mending nets, hanging out. And

invites them into something that is so much bigger than themselves. In this moment of opportunity, they take a risk. Because the kingdom of God stands before them and they must act.

Today our scripture is reminding us that we have a key role to play in the kingdom. It is not just that the kingdom of God is near, but that we as God's beloved creatures are a part of bringing the kingdom into reality. Repent, we are told. Repent of the evil that enslaves us. The evil we have done and the evil done on our behalf. Repent of the trappings of this life so that we may usher in the newness of God's creation.

From the very beginning, the first day of Jesus's ministry, salvation isn't something that happens to us. It is something that we are active participants in. Asked to give of ourselves as God gives of God's self for us. While the seemingly blind following of the disciples can be seen as questionable at best, we are being given examples of what it means to take our place in the building of the kingdom. What it means to take risks for the sake of the Good.

But this isn't just the work of the disciples. We see this in a million ways every day. If you drive around the city

of Chicago, you may have seen the new tents. In my neighborhood, Uptown, they are everywhere. Viaducts and underpasses are lined with bright orange fishing tents, built to withstand the cold winds and retain heat as temperatures plummet. These tents across the city are the work of a Pilsen resident, just a guy named Andy who owns a plant store doing something that he thinks matters. This winter he has handed out over 100 of these tents to folks living on the streets, ultimately ending up in a large-scale battle with the city over housing policy and the dignity of the unhoused in our city. In a recent Block Club Chicago article, he is quoted as saying he's trying to do something to make things just a little bit better.

Doing something to make things just a little bit better. That is what we are being called to. Active participation is our world in order to build the kingdom. It won't necessarily look like fishing tents or walking away from our whole lives. It won't look the same for all of us. But God is asking something of each of us. To show up. To take risks. To walk with God in the creation of the kingdom.

Amen.