

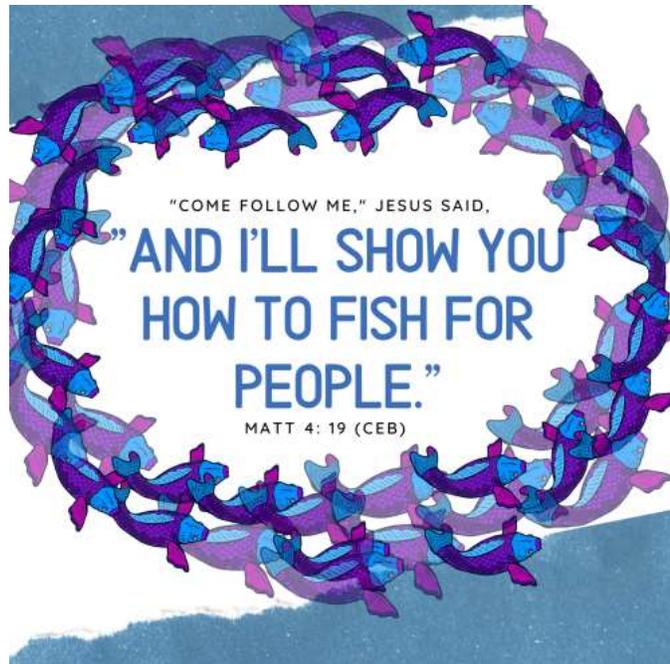
Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 26, 2020

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Isaiah 9: 1-4
Matthew 4: 12-23

Fishers of People

“Some times in our lives
We all have pain, we all have sorrow.
But if we are wise
We know that there’s
Always tomorrow.
Lean on me,
When you’re not strong,
And I’ll be your friend,
I’ll help you carry on.
For it won’t be long
Till I’m gonna need
Somebody to lean on.”



From 1972 this song has played on repeat on our radios, CDs, iPods, and Bluetooth speakers as a feel-good anthem of love and kindness. I wonder if the young Bill Withers dreamed that one day his song, written in a low point of his life, would bring so much hope for millions of people across the world.

Bill grew up in the small town of Slab Fork, West Virginia. As many know, living in a small town can become cumbersome when everyone and their Aunt Betty knows your business, but with that comes a community ethic we just don’t see in the big towns.

And so, with dreams of making it one day, Bill moved to LA to write and produce songs that could put him on the map. However, what he found was a lonely experience living in a rundown apartment where he could barely afford to pay the rent. And it was from this dark experience of life that birthed the lyrics of “Lean on Me.” A man who walked in darkness saw a great light.

It’s a funny thing that when we are surrounded by people all the time, all we want in that moment is to be left alone, extrovert or introvert we all know that feeling. But being alone just a second too long drives us straight back into those overbearing groups of arms. I was talking with some people lately about that feeling Bill must have had...utter gloom and darkness while also probably dealing with some mild or severe form of mental illness, like anxiety or depression. We talked about how most of us choose to put a mask on when we are out in public or at a function where no one really needs to know what’s going on inside us. That mask that you put on in the morning to tell yourself, “Just get out of bed, it’s a new day, you can do this.” Or that mask you put on when you get out of the car, walking into work saying, “Just smile, no one will ask you

what's going on back home if you don't show them your tears." Or that mask you put on in front of your very close friends, afraid what they may think of you when you share that you contemplated taking your life last night. That mask comes in many different shapes, but what it does is imprison us; it traps us within, so that we are living in perpetual darkness. We are too afraid of the fear of judgement by the outside world. We would rather suffer alone. We are people who walk in darkness, yet we search for a great light.

Today's reading is from Isaiah, chapter 9, verses 1-4:

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
God has multiplied the nations,
and our joy increases day by day;
like the day of harvest we resound with joy.
For the yoke of their burden, the weight that bears on our shoulders,
And the oppressive rod of the enemy has been broken.*

That light Isaiah is proclaiming to the Israelites is massive...life changing. We've been following a series on Isaiah's text and seen themes of judgement over the Israelites' rebellion and proclamations of hope that one day God's blessings would flow over all the nations. It is that hope he proclaims that makes him speak out against the idolatry and corruption of God's people. In chapter 7 we learned that Israel would be chopped down like a tree and left like a stump in the field. The stump itself would be scorched and burned, but then God said that the smoldering stump is a Holy Seed that would survive into the future. Now that's a small sign of hope, but who or what is that small seed? Isaiah explains that it will first be Assyria that will chop Israel down and devastate the land, but there is hope. Because of God's promise to David (remember back to the time of Kings), he will send after this destruction a new king named "Immanuel" which means "God with us." It will be Immanuel's kingdom that will set God's people free from violent oppressive empires. Isaiah described this king as a small shoot that will grow out of the cut down tree of Israel.

The Israelites imagined a king who would come and break oppression, demolish unjust treatment of the Jews, and wipe away the enemies from the Promised Land. But instead we see the King of the Jews come in the form of a baby who would grow into his ministry, not demolishing oppressive kingdoms, but collecting followers one by one. As we read in our Gospel text this morning, Jesus didn't enter his ministry with a big splash, but rather he invited the disciples to join him, to be fishers of people.

To back up in the story for a minute, John the Baptist was arrested for condemning the marriage of King Herod (a different Herod, the son, it's confusing but there are a lot of King Herod's in the Gospel). And Jesus was devastated and fearful, so he fled to Galilee where we began to

unfold the prophecy we read in Isaiah. The light would come on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. And there his ministry began. He began proclaiming in God's name, *Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come!*

And so at this point the Jews may have predicted, he is about to come in with the big hammer, it's our turn to rule! Here he comes! Kind of like a big match in an arena. But that wasn't his first step, was it? As he walked by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers (Peter and Andrew) and then James and John inviting them also, *Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.* The fisherman didn't question his invitation but dropped their nets and followed him. Jesus began by teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. He began by curing not just some but every disease and every sickness of God's people.

Jesus came to end a different form of oppression. He lived here on this earth with the Israelites, who prayed for his coming, to teach them that this life on earth is a temporary home; in heaven is your greatest reward, everlasting life. They wouldn't have to live trapped by sin but be set free. Well we know how the Jews ended up feeling about that, but Christians began to form around him and follow his Word, proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel.

I think we crave to be bathed in the light Isaiah talks about, but societal norms, stigmas, and self-denial create a comfortable darkness. Perhaps we hide behind the masks because we are afraid...afraid of not being accepted...afraid of being judged...afraid of being hurt. But 365 times in the Bible we are told, *Be not afraid.*

Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged. Deuteronomy 31: 8

Be strong. Do not be afraid, God will come. Isaiah 35: 4

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid. John 14: 27

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged. Joshua 1: 9

Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name. Isaiah 43:1

Even though I walk through the valley of darkness, I will fear no evil. Psalm 23:4

You could challenge yourself for one year to read each of those passages once a day.

And that's just step one folks. We need to step out of the darkness of the Israelites, of the fear, and walk into light, walk into hope...because our next task is just as important.

Jesus called us to invite people into the boat. I shared with the children today that they could tell people about Jesus by doing certain things like sharing their Bibles, or inviting them to the Valentine's Party here at Woods, or tossing out a life raft for a friend who is sad and needs some cheering up. There are so many things God has put in our lives to spread the light of Isaiah's passage. Bring people with you when you serve with Meals on Wheels or Habitat for Humanity; tell your neighbor about the new Heart to Heart bible study Tuesday mornings, invite a student

who's interested in drama to one of David's magnificent productions here at Woods, share a pamphlet from the counseling center with a friend who's grieving. God doesn't make it challenging for us to share the light, it is us who hold back from fear. But I believe we are all fishers of people.

God doesn't always work in our lives like the way we expect. The Israelites expected a powerful king to demolish the oppressors. Christ was and is a voice of hope and a promise for perpetual grace. Will you be fishers of people? Amen.