

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Rev. Claire George-Drumheller
“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven Has Come Near”
Matthew 4:12-23
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
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The plot of the gospel of Matthew follows the succession of kings of Judea – from one Herod to the next, to the next. Herod the Great was the king of Judea at the time of Jesus’ birth. He was appointed by the Romans, the occupying force, and he was a paranoid ruler. He killed political rivals and even his own family members when he suspected conspiracy. Herod was insecure in his place of power, but he had been appointed king of the Jews by the Romans. When the magi told him of the birth of Jesus, the new “king of the Jews,” he ordered the slaughter of the innocents. Herod was only the first harsh ruler in Jesus’ lifetime.

At Herod’s death, his son Archelaus took power over Judea, and the son was even more brutal than the father. Archelaus was so cruel, the Romans later removed him from power; the Romans, known to be a brutal occupying force, could not tolerate Archelaus’ abuse.

Archelaus was replaced by his brother, Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas was responsible for the arrest of John the Baptist. And later in the gospel of Matthew, Herod Antipas orders John to be executed, all because he so greatly enjoyed a dance at his birthday party.ⁱ

Knowing that this is the land where Jesus walked and taught, let’s hear today’s scripture from Matthew 4:12-23:

² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶ 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.”*

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸ As he walked 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 fish for people.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Today's text begins with Jesus' hearing of John's arrest, and then Matthew reminds us of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." We can imagine what that darkness looked like during the time of Jesus. We can imagine what that darkness felt like: brutal king after brutal king; unjust imprisonments and unmerited executions; foreign rulers. The darkness was real for Jesus and his followers. Isaiah spoke of people who sit in darkness, and Jesus would have experienced that darkness firsthand.

It's a time in our modern history when we also know darkness. Perhaps we know all too well what darkness looks like – what darkness feels like. Every Sunday when we gather to worship, we bring worries, distractions, anxieties, and hopes. Today is no different; perhaps today is even elevated. As we come to hear about the light that shines, as we hear about the kingdom of heaven, we also bring the burden of the darkness. We bring with us the distractions of the one who has been inaugurated and the ones marching in the streets.ⁱⁱ We bring with us distractions of approval and disapproval ratings. Our minds wander to the health of our country and the disagreements we've had with family and friends. The prophet Isaiah spoke to a people who sat in a land of darkness, and we also know that same darkness.

Today's text is a story of two kingdoms: the land of darkness and the kingdom of heaven. Jesus began his public ministry in Matthew with these words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus lived in the reality of an earthly kingdom – a land of darkness. Jesus' life was set in a historical period of a brutal government, and Jesus ate and spoke with people who had been sitting in a land of darkness – a people who were surrounded by darkness: by fear, by pain, by turmoil, by injustice.

And in the midst of the earthly reality – in the midst of the land of darkness, Jesus begins to speak of the kingdom of heaven. When the writer of Matthew speaks about heaven, it isn't just a place you go after you die; the kingdom of heaven isn't just a goal for the afterlife. Jesus' teachings of the kingdom of heaven are not about our escape from this earthly world into another world. Instead, when Jesus speaks about the kingdom of heaven, he speaks about God's sovereign rule. The kingdom of heaven is as much a reality for our life on earth as is about life after death.ⁱⁱⁱ For the Gospel of Matthew, the kingdom of heaven is not an abstract doctrine; the kingdom of heaven is an earthly truth: God reigns on earth, as it is in heaven. The kingdom of heaven is about here and now because God's reign is active here and now.^{iv}

In the midst of an earthly reality – while under the reign of a tyrant, while a subject of King Herod after King Herod – Jesus speaks of a different a kingdom, a kingdom where God is the supreme ruler, a kingdom where our reality is life under God's reign.

And only one word separates us from the land of darkness and the kingdom of heaven. Only one action separates us from the reality of tyranny and the reality of God's reign. Only one word makes that transition from darkness to light: repent.

Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." In the church, and perhaps especially in the South, we are used to hearing the word *repent* as a scary word. We often see "REPENT!" emblazoned on billboards or yelled from street-corner preachers. The word *repent* often evokes guilt or emotional confession of sins. For Matthew, however, *repent* and the *confession of sins* are *not* the same thing. In Greek, *repent* literally means to "change one's mind." In Hebrew, *to repent* means "to turn or return." To *repent* means to change your mind. To *repent* means to change the

direction of your life. To *repent* means to get yourself a new orientation for the way you live, and then to act on it.^v To *repent* means to turn away from the darkness and to return to God.

“From that time,” the text says, “Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” *Adjust your direction* because God’s reign has come near. *Reorient your life* because God’s rule is active here and now. *Return to God* because God’s kingdom has drawn near. The people have sat in a land of darkness. And yet, the kingdom of heaven has come near. This is a story of two kingdoms: the land of darkness and the kingdom of heaven, and only the action *repent* stands between our dwelling in darkness and our knowing the truth of God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. Like generations before us, we too know the land of darkness, but we have been offered these words of Jesus: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Jesus begins his ministry with the call to repent, and then Matthew gives us an example. Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John *repented*. When Jesus invited them to follow, they responded; they reoriented their lives; they changed their direction; they turned to God. “Follow me,” Jesus called out. And as they dropped their nets, they repented – they turned to God. As they stepped out of the boat, they repented – they reoriented their lives.

Like the disciples before us, we sit in a land of darkness, but we have heard these words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the weekend after Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, and so the Civil Rights movement has on my heart and mind. On MLK Day, I watched the film *Selma* with some UKirk college students. The film tells the story of the historical march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. The movie portrays King and many of his colleagues, including a young Representative John Lewis. Before Lewis became a politician, before he was in the news for boycotting the inauguration, Lewis was a Civil Rights leader. Representative Lewis grew up in a land of darkness. Lewis’s land was dominated by segregation and racial discrimination, hatred and violence. “Repent,” Jesus says, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is a story of two kingdoms: the land of darkness and the kingdom of heaven, and all that stands between is that action *repent*.

Lewis reoriented his life; he adjusted his priorities; he gained a new set of values. Congressman Lewis left his family, left his home in Alabama, to join the activism of the Civil Rights. Lewis knew what it meant to sit in a land of darkness, and so he reoriented his life. Instead of *sitting* in that darkness, he sat at lunch counters, asking to be served a simple meal;^{vi} instead of sitting in darkness, he moved to repentance, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Congressman Lewis marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama; he marched across that bridge, knowing the darkness but with his heart set on the kingdom of heaven. Congressman Lewis marched on Washington, hearing of Dr. King’s dream: a dream where bread is broken, where justice reigns, where the image of God is recognized in all – a dream of the kingdom of heaven.

Instead of sitting in a land of darkness, we are called to repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. For the kingdom of heaven *has* come near – a kingdom where violence is absent and love overwhelms; a kingdom where God reigns on earth as it is in heaven. We are a people who know what it means to sit in a land of darkness. We are a people who know what darkness looks like, how it feels. And to us, Jesus proclaims, “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

The darkness is real. Friday (Inauguration Day) was a hard day for me. I felt like I was sitting in darkness. Many of us face anxiety at what will happen in America the next four years, and even going forward from there. Many tears were shed at the inauguration – some in joy and some in heartbreak.

Many of us personally know the reality of an America divided; we know tension among our family, our friends, and in our workplaces. And exactly to us, Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This is a story of two kingdoms: the land of darkness and the kingdom of heaven, and all that stands between is that action *repent*. It is ok to know the darkness. The darkness is real, but it’s not the Truth. The Truth is the kingdom of heaven has come near. Our response to the darkness is not to complain; we are called to respond, but not with apathy. The response is not to sit back and do nothing – not to hold your breath and roll your eyes for four years, or eight years; the response is not to gloat when your guy wins and to pout when yours loses. When faced with darkness, Jesus’ command is clear: REPENT. We are called to action, and the action is to repent: to reorient our lives; to adjust our priorities; to gain a new set of values; to return to God.

Check in with yourself. What it is that worries you? What is causing you anxiety? Women’s rights? Housing and care for our nation’s veterans? The well-being refugees? The state of public education? The loss of jobs and increase in unemployment? What is it weighing on your heart? What is it that causes you concern? Identify it, and then repent. Like Representative Lewis, recognize the darkness in our land, and then repent; act. Like Peter and Andrew, James and John, respond to the call to follow Christ; repent – reorient your life; return to God. Repent so that even in the land of darkness, your Truth is the kingdom of heaven. Repent so that you make the kingdom of heaven known to those around you; repent so that you might help others know more than the darkness; repent so that you might point to the light that has shined.

The people sit in a land of darkness. And yet, the kingdom of heaven has come near. This is a story of two kingdoms: the land of darkness and the kingdom of heaven, and all that stands between is that action *repent*. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

ⁱ *Texts for Preaching*, Year A, Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome

ⁱⁱ “Looking into the Lectionary with Jill Duffield,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

ⁱⁱⁱ Garrett, Greg. *Feasting on the Word*, Homiletical Perspective. Year A, Vol. 1, 284-289

^{iv} *New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. VIII. “Excursus: Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew,” pp. 288-294

^v *New Interpreters Bible* Vol. VIII, p. 167

^{vi} Interview with John Lewis, November 20, 1973 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/A-0073/A-0073.html>