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I am a woman who lived in Galilee in the 9th century BC. Things look bad from where I sit. Already our brothers to the north have been overrun, and we doubt that our King can save us. Yet we have to have faith in our God, the one who brought us out of Egypt into the land of milk and honey. We have to believe that some day the light will dawn again, and we will be free to pursue our lives without fear of an army from the north. The prophet Isaiah gives us hope for a peaceful future.

I am a woman who lived in Galilee in the 1st century AD. Just like my ancestors from nearly a thousand years ago, things are looking pretty bad. We've been under the Roman rule for a long time now, and they are bleeding our land. We are mere shadows, compared to the way our parents lived. We are waiting, waiting for the dawn, waiting for someone to break this yoke of Roman oppression.

Jesus quoted the scripture from almost a thousand years before his time, remembering this salvation psalm spoken by Isaiah for his people. Jesus is a new phenomenon, a rising star, in Galilee; the locals haven't seen or heard anyone like him before. Well, no one exactly like him. They had heard about John, that strange wild man from the desert further south at the Jordan River. John had screamed at people to "repent" and then baptized them as a sign of their new life.

Apparently this fellow Jesus had submitted to that same baptism, and soon afterward John had been arrested by King Herod. Now Jesus has come north to Galilee – far

away from Herod – and he talks about repentance but adds a new element, a new motivation for repenting. Repent, he says, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

That sounds good. Maybe I should start my sermon that way every Sunday, here in the Galilee of New England we call Vermont. How do you think that would go over? Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. It sounds rather... nice...warm and fuzzy... probably safe... distant from every day life, because we don't know just what it means.... wouldn't it be nice to usher in the Kingdom of God? If we knew how?

But here's the thing: it may sound nice and tame to us in 2017, but how do you think those folks in Galilee heard it 2000 years ago? Jesus' choice of words was very intentional. And whatever else he might have meant by it, "Kingdom" is a "political" word. "Political" is defined as anything relating to the government or the public affairs of a country. The governors of the land of Israel in Jesus' time were puppet kings, part of the vast empire of Rome and its governors. For Jesus to walk around Galilee saying, "The Kingdom of God is at hand" was not just some irrelevant "spiritual" thing to say. No: it was a direct slap in the face to the Empire of Rome. That is how all those folks in Galilee by the lakeshore would have heard it. God's Kingdom is NOT Rome's kingdom, he said. And it's right here, right now.

Don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that Jesus set out to create a political party or some kind of military revolution. Jesus' way was the "third way" and it relied on what we now call "passive resistance" (in the style of Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr.). Jesus said, "Give Caesar his due" when they asked about taxes and the coins issued by the system. But at the same time Jesus challenged the law, saying that laws are made to help humankind, and not the other way around.

Jesus' movement of 2000 years ago was not like a third party on the general ballot. (There's a whopper of an anachronism for you, as if the people of Israel had anything remotely close to modern democracy.) But to help us think about it in our terms, it was

as if Jesus offered a whole different ballot and maybe even a whole different election. Jesus stood in stark contrast to the ways of the Empire, not because of military might or accumulated wealth or power, but through his obedience to the law of love.

Those fishermen in Galilee, seeing the great shadow of oppression cast by the Roman Empire even way out there in the north country, surely they experienced Jesus as a light in their darkness. Surely they heard his call to live in God's kingdom as a direct challenge to the everyday injustice they saw around them. And so when these young men heard Jesus say, "Follow me", it was not a call to armed rebellion, not even a call to direct confrontation of the Romans. It was a call to a different way of life, one that demanded obedience to a different set of values, one that called for an all-out commitment to God's way.

What was the choice, for those young men? Much has been made over the years about their immediate willingness to leave behind home and family obligations. But we cannot put ourselves in their shoes, exactly. Just how bad was it for their families? Were they already victims of a grinding poverty exacerbated by the Roman taxation? Were they already sick and disheartened and immobilized by the shadows?

Sure, Peter and Andrew, and James and John, could have chosen to keep on living as they had been, they could have chosen to sit back and wait to see how things play out in the next period of time, they could have let someone else make the sacrifices needed to create change. But fortunately, for us, their children's children's children, they made a different, more pro-active choice: they chose to live righteously in the present moment following the example of One whose total obedience was to God. They walked alongside him to teach, to heal, and to liberate people from injustice.

Let's consider more about this "call" of Jesus. It's a word and a story we've heard at least once a year, for those of us who have spent a good part of our lives in church. His first word, in introducing himself to the world of Galilee, was "repent." In English,

repent does NOT mean to feel guilty over your individual shortcomings and mistakes. It does not mean that God will hate you and abandon you if you don't repent. It certainly does not mean you are a worthless and doomed sinner from the moment of your birth. No.

Repent does mean this: to turn, to make a 180 degree turn and come back to a way of life that is obedient to God's love. Walk 100% in the way Christ has forged for you, the righteous path, and do it REGARDLESS of the civic structure in which you find yourself embedded.

Who were these fishermen who heard Jesus' call, down by the lakeshore? They were ordinary hardworking people, those who survived by the work of their own hands and not by patronage. Certainly these young men had heard about Jesus: he was the gone-viral sensation of the day. Strangers don't come into a small village without being noticed. They must have been curious about him: his manner of dress, his speech, his purpose. Even 2000 years later, we are curious about him, too.

Jesus walks by two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew and says to them. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Huh? They weren't dumb enough to think he meant that literally, as if they were cannibals! So what DID they hear? Was Jesus so charismatic that they followed in a hypnotic trance? Or had they heard his earlier words, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near," and were eager to stand up for justice and righteousness, to take that 180 turn toward a new life, and to commit to the journey that would lead them to the Kingdom of God.

If that's why the disciples said yes, and followed Jesus, we must also ask the opposite question: why did Jesus want these guys to follow him? Did he need some go-phers, some assistants for his works of healing? Did he need them as witnesses? Did he imagine they would be bodyguards if he got into trouble like John?

Traditionally we have thought of the disciples as being there so someone could tell the story later, so that after Jesus' death there would be someone to carry on with the Way. I think there's something additional in Jesus' call. I think that from the beginning Jesus wanted people to understand that to repent meant an active turning OF THE WHOLE COMMUNITY toward God's path. Responding to God's call is not a purely individual act but rather a communal one. Jesus didn't call them one by one. They came two by two. They came already in relationship.

The call of the fishermen is a very big story in Christianity. There's a book, a movie, and probably millions of sermons written with that title. It explores many themes: what call means, what repentance means, what the Kingdom of God means.

But there are only a handful of careful examinations of what Jesus' call meant in its socio-political context. What was their world like? Was following Jesus not only a personal decision, but a political statement? There is no way for us to know that for sure.

The last sentence reads: "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." Jesus' movement was about gathering people onto a path of wholeness and righteousness. It was not about amassing power and influence and wealth. Jesus' way of living stood in direct contrast to the diminished lives people were living under the reign of the empire. His way of living was in itself a political statement.

Are you still with me? I'm telling old, old stories here today, and maybe you are up for hearing some new stories with the same theme. Stories about modern folk who are willing to step out from the shadows of disillusionment and resignation. People who

follow in the light of Jesus, in the freedom of Jesus' Way, and with a vision of a world ruled by God's love.

Yes, I want to hear those stories, too. But more than just hearing about them, or telling you about other people who have lived them, I want to BE in them. I want US to be in them, I want this community to itself live into God's Kingdom. I want to kindle that hope among you.

The big question now is this: what does the call of Christ mean to us right now, in this moment in our lives, in this moment in history? Many in this church have, over the years, clearly heard the call to mission and charity for the needy and we have many ministries that prove it. We are following in the steps of Jesus' hospitality, generosity and healing.

Proclaiming the good news of God's Kingdom, though, is something else again. We're a lot more vague and reticent. We're not sure what it means, and we Yankees don't much like that word "evangelical".

In this time and in this place, let me remind you of something very important: proclaiming the Good News of God's Kingdom is much more practical. It's about bringing light and refusing to sit still moping in the darkness. It's about gathering together with others who are passionate about justice so that we can "break the yoke," as we heard in Isaiah.

Do you wonder what that means? It's breaking the yoke of injustice. God's justice teaches that it is not right to marginalize people because of their gender, their color, their immigration status, their disability, their poverty or homelessness, or for any other reason. No one must suffer under an unjust yoke of law or legal misinterpretations. That insistence on justice has been part of the Kingdom of God since Moses was wandering around in the wilderness. It's a cornerstone of our faith.

I pray for all of you here today, I pray for everyone in this country AND around the world, that we will proclaim Jesus' light of justice so that all hearts will be lifted up and

there will be no more gloom. Claim that light. Claim the nearness of God's Kingdom and its justice. And live into the power of Jesus' Way. Today. Amen.

Isaiah 9: 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.

You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Matthew 4:12-23

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

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles— 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."

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 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 lake--for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. 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.