

AGAIN, A BEGINNING
Isaiah 9: 1-4; Matthew 4: 12-23
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by Pat Berger

Lectionary readings leading up to today's scripture from Matthew would have us looking at the beginning of Jesus' ministry from different angles. The 3rd chapter of Matthew includes Matthew's telling of John the Baptist and him baptizing Jesus. John told those who were around them that the one who came after him would baptize with Holy Spirit and with fire. Clearly, a new beginning. And the reading included the telling of God's voice coming from the heavens and saying to those who had gathered, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And then there was a reading from the Gospel of John. There we would have heard of John the Baptist telling his listeners, "There is the Lamb of God." And John told of those people following John the Baptist and Jesus -- they wanted to know where Jesus was staying, whereupon Jesus invited them to come along, to "come and see." Another beginning.

Today's New Testament reading has us back in the Gospel according to Matthew, just at the place where Jesus **begins** his ministry. He had moved to a little town -- Capernaum had about 1000 residents at that time -- and apparently he moved there so that Isaiah's words might be fulfilled: Adrienne read for us, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. . . . on them light has shined . . . you have increased its joy . . ." Dark and light are important in Matthew; clearly, he thinks that a part of Jesus' task was to bring light. Although when we hear the words from Isaiah it is easy for us to imagine them having been said about Jesus, in fact Isaiah was talking for God to the people of his time, people who had been living under an oppressive government. God would make it light for them, Isaiah said.

And then, Matthew records Jesus using those words about light as he began his ministry. Here was another who would bring light. And how

would that happen? It would happen, Jesus said, as the people repented. He didn't tell them first of all to believe; he didn't tell them first of all to worship or to praise; he told them first of all to repent. "Repent" is not primarily a word that means, "to say you are sorry;" "repent" is a word that means turn; it means to find a new direction. And the verb tense used here is one that indicates continuous action. Repent is not something that one does once and that takes care of it. Repent is something required of us every day, and all day every day.

Brian Stoffregen writes:

Repentance properly understood is an "I can't" experience rather than an "I can" experience. If repentance is promising God, "I can do better," then we are trying to keep ourselves in control of our lives. If we **can** do better, we don't need a gracious God, only a patient One who will wait long enough for us to do better. When we come before God confessing, "I can't do better," then we are dying to self. We are giving up control of our lives. We are throwing our sinful lives on the mercy of God. We are inviting God to do what we can't do ourselves -- namely to raise the dead -- to change and recreate us.

Those who repented then, those who were changed and recreated by God, became the ones who brought light. As we continue our journey through Matthew today, we are along as Jesus calls his first disciples. "Follow me," he says, and they go. Now part of the adventure in trying to read this piece as it is written is that we know it too well, or at least we think that we do, and we don't really listen. So try it this way just for a moment. Tomorrow morning, you are at work - - you can imagine either the job that you have, or one that you once had, or one that you wish you had; whatever -- in any case, you are at work. And someone comes up to you, and you look up to see someone you don't know (because in all likelihood Peter and Andrew and James and John had not previously met Jesus). And this man, whom you do not know, says to you, "Follow me." And he says it in such a way that: you follow him!

Oh, I am way too sensible for that, you will tell me; I would at least have said, "Where?" or "Why?" or "But I have deadlines!" But folks, this is Jesus! Likely, we have not been face to face with Jesus, just like Peter and Andrew and James and John. And what Matthew tells us is that immediately, immediately Peter and Andrew left their nets and followed him. Immediately James and John left the boat and their father and followed him.

Eugene Boring, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, writes:

. . . these men have never seen Jesus before, have seen no miracles, heard no teachings. No explanation has been given them. They are not told why they should follow Jesus, what following him will mean, or where the path will lead them. We are met there with Jesus' first miracle, the miracle of his powerful word that creates following, that makes disciples. . . . The messianic community, the church, comes into being in response to Christ's own word.

Two words challenging us today: repent and follow. Two words from The Word, Jesus. We can repent -- when we acknowledge that in fact we can't, without God's help. And we can follow -- when we acknowledge that in fact we can't, without the invitation of the Christ. We have been invited. It is time for another beginning for each of us, too.

Let us pray.