

Epiphany 3, Year A  
Matthew 4:12-23  
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Last week I noted the significant differences between John's gospel and the other three on the calling of the first disciples. Though I am tempted, there really is no point in belaboring those differences again; they prove what they proved last week, that the evangelists were creative writers preaching good news in a manner universally understood by their audience. They were not historians or journalists in the modern sense, seeking to apprise people who would not be born for nearly two thousand years as to what transpired when Jesus began to gather people around him.

Matthew has a different point to make. John the Evangelist wanted to emphasize the complete subordination of John the Baptist to Jesus. Matthew does that as well, but it happens in the baptism of Jesus rather than in the call of the first disciples. As he does throughout his gospel, Matthew sees this moment as the fulfillment of prophecy. It matters where these disciples were called. Isaiah declared that the "light" would first dawn in "Galilee of the Gentiles," and therefore that is how Matthew depicts it. As for the call itself, he quotes Mark's gospel almost word for word. All the evidence we have suggests that Jesus really was raised in Galilee, and that he started preaching and teaching there.

From Matthew's perspective, this was the "light" that dawned upon the people who "sat in darkness."

Both in Isaiah's time and in Matthew's several hundred years later, Galilee was a very unlikely place for the "light to dawn." Geographically it was separated from the bulk of the population - and Jerusalem in particular - by the Samaria to the south, and it was full of Gentiles, hence the term "Galilee of the Gentiles." Few people speculating about where God would begin the movement of the Spirit would have guessed Galilee would be the place from which such a movement would begin. It was too rustic, and ignorant, too far removed from any important center of activity, and in no sense whatsoever was it a spiritual center for anything within Judaism. And yet, that is what happened. It began on the outside and pushed its way toward the center; it did not begin in the center and push its way out. That is the image I want to ponder for moment here, because I believe God works that way far more often than might be imagined.

Even a glance at American history reveals that the halls of Congress are almost never the place where significant movements begin. Child labor laws, which are everywhere now taken for granted as important safeguards did not come about because some senator decided to do something about a problem. They came about because ordinary American citizens began to protest against the abuse of children, and after a while Congress reacted to these protests by, at length, recognizing their validity. The same is true of workplace safety laws, particularly in the coal mines of Appalachia. People were dying of black lung,

toxic gases and cave-ins long before Congress and the coal companies bestirred themselves to act. When they did bestir themselves it was because the people of obscure, backwater regions of the country protested long enough and effectively enough to force action. Change started on the periphery and moved toward the center.

The founding Fathers ignored, side-stepped, finessed the question of slavery. In the center, nothing happened, nor would it have had it not been for obscure people like Frederick Douglas, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. It was they, and many more like them, who created the kind of agitation, and I use the word advisedly in view of its history, that brought the question of slavery to the forefront of American consciousness. At every painful step of the long road to freedom and equality in this country it was the outside pushing into the center. In the terms of today's lessons, over and over again the "light dawned" in the Galilees of this nation.

A glance at the broad sweep of spiritual history reveals the same sort of thing. Kings, counsellors, rulers of various sorts, are not often inspired in and of themselves to initiate great movements of the Spirit of God. It happens, I should think, but not very often. Where the power of God's love transforms people and societies, leading them to look at the world from the point of view of the people who are damaged and victimized by the way the laws work, rather than looking at the world from the point of view of the people who are made more

comfortable by the ways the laws work, the movement nearly always starts from the outside, from places no one would think important.

The reason should be obvious. The people in the center, the people in power, are inevitably the people most benefited by the way things are now. If they weren't, other people would be in power. The natural perspective of such people is to protect the system already in place, and to be leery of movements that question it. There is rarely malice in this, though I won't exclude it as a possible motive among some people. Rather, it is far more often a case of being unaware of the total effect of the way things are. The push towards greater compassion, greater mercy, greater inclusiveness nearly always comes from the periphery precisely because that is where the people who have not gotten compassion, not received mercy, not been included in the benefits of whatever system is in place live.

The same thing is true today, which is why we need to listen to Isaiah and to Matthew. The light of the Spirit in this world dawns on the outside and shines into the inside. Isaiah would not have been surprised to see that the hopes of those who thought George W. Bush was the heaven sent president were dashed. Nor would he have been surprised when those people who were convinced that Barak Obama was going to usher in the kingdom were equally disappointed. He would predict, reliably I am certain, that President Trump is not the messiah either. The world has produced a few truly great rulers, and among those few some have proven to be especially inspired by God to lead their nations into new

insights about the dignity of each person and the true purpose of leadership, which is not to create a world in which the powerless serve the powerful, but to work for a world in which the powerful safeguard the powerless. But nearly always that movement of the spirit which harnesses and transforms the strength of the powerful so that it becomes a means to protect the powerless starts on the periphery and moves toward the center. When the light dawns it is nearly always in Galilee.

So on this weekend when we have just inaugurated a new president, and so seen a change in the center, let us all remember Isaiah, and Matthew's interpretation of Isaiah, and realize once again that the center is not always as important as we imagine it to be. It is from the edges, from the obscure places no one can imagine in advance that the light of God first shines in this world, and from there is radiates out until it has transformed the center.

Certainly I believe that the presidency and therefore the president matters, and matters a lot, It matters who is ruler anywhere in this world, and in this country perhaps more than anywhere else. Whether you are excited and optimistic about the next four years or, worried and concerned about them, if you are looking for the call of God, if you are seeking to glimpse the dawning light of the Spirit's presence, now, as always, don't look in at the center, for it probably won't start there. Look at the periphery, look at the edges, look at the places no one looks, and at the people no one looks at. For there, in the Galilees of this nation and this world you are most apt to see the stirrings of the Spirit,

there is where you are most apt to find the light that dawns. And no, I don't know what it will look like either, but I do know where I am going to be looking.