

Advent Reflections

Matthew 4:12-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 6, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹² 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.”
(Matthew 4:12-17, NRSV)



In 2001, John Grisham, who usually specializes in legal thrillers, wrote a wildly-popular novel called *Skipping Christmas*. It was the story of Luther and Nora Krank, a middle-aged couple spending their very first Christmas apart from their daughter, Blaire, who has left for the Peace Corps in Peru. Their sadness eventually morphs into an all-out detest for the season once Luther calculates how much they normally spend on decorations, gifts, donations and entertaining – a whopping \$6,100. The decision is made. They will skip Christmas entirely and Luther books a 10-day Caribbean cruise during the holidays on the Island Princess. Instead of roasting chestnuts on an open fire, they will be tanning their bodies in the tropical sun.

Anybody here ever thought about skipping Christmas?

What about skipping Advent? I’m not sure Grisham could have made the New York Times Bestseller List with a book called *Skipping Advent*. Partly because it’s a story that’s too believable. Not many people skip Christmas. That’s unusual. Lots of people skip Advent. Most people don’t even know what it is.

In our tradition, Advent begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas. This year it was last Sunday. The name comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means

“coming”. Again, it’s not necessarily a season to prepare for the coming of Jesus to Bethlehem - that already happened. Instead, it’s a season to prepare for the coming of Christ again, the second coming, that future day, whether near or far off, when Christ will bring heaven to earth in all its fullness and all things will finally be set right. It’s also the day when all of us will stand before Christ as judge and give account for our lives. Advent is a season set aside for us to prepare for the second coming of Christ.

The scripture we just read from Matthew 4 is a good Advent scripture. It’s fitting that it was our reading for the day as we go through Matthew. John the Baptist has been put into prison. He will never get out again, as he is eventually executed there. Now that the forerunner to the Messiah is off the scene, it’s time for the Messiah himself to take center stage. Jesus does so in Capernaum. This wouldn’t have been surprising to anybody who was paying attention, but most people weren’t paying attention. They expected the Messiah to show up in Jerusalem, not in a place like Galilee. Especially not in a place like Capernaum, which was nicknamed “The Galilee of the Gentiles” because of its long history of being settled by second-class non-Jews.

As a result, this part of Palestine was generally despised by Jews living in Jerusalem, especially the religious hierarchy. It contributed to what made it very difficult for many of them to ever accept Jesus. He was born to the wrong people, came from the wrong village, hung out with the wrong crowd, and centered his ministry in the wrong region. And yet this is exactly what the Old Testament had foretold. Matthew quotes Isaiah here, the great prophet among prophets. He could have quoted from a hundred other places. The Galilee of the Gentiles, that’s where the Messiah would shine his light.

According to Matthew, the very first public words Jesus speaks are these: “**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**” They are not only the first words Jesus speaks, they are also as good a summary as any of the ultimate message he came to bring. That message has two parts, God’s part and our part. God’s part is to bring the kingdom of heaven. Our part is to repent. And that’s the order. Jesus does not tell us to repent *so that* the kingdom of heaven will come near. We are to repent *because the kingdom of heaven has already come near!* Human action never enables God’s action.

It's always the other way around. God always acts first. Our actions are always in response.

The kingdom of heaven has come near. A kingdom always has a king or a queen, some sovereign who rules over the realm of his or her kingdom. In a kingdom all the matters and goings-on are in line with the will and pleasure of the king. Those who do not want to conform to the rule and reign of the king – and conformity is always an option! – well, they can choose to live life outside the kingdom, forsaking all its responsibilities, but also all its blessings. I don't have to live in America. There are any number of countries which I could call my home. If I choose to live here, however, there are certain responsibilities to which I must conform. I have to pay taxes. I have to follow the laws. I have to respect the rights of other Americans. There are also certain blessings, certain rights and privileges I get to enjoy as citizen, mainly the freedom of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. If I leave America, I leave both these responsibilities and these blessings behind. It's the same with the kingdom of heaven. To choose to become a citizen is then to conform to all the responsibilities, but also to enjoy all the blessings.

To be clear, Jesus does not suggest that the kingdom of heaven *might* come, or *could* come. He declares in no uncertain terms that it *has* come, and *is coming*. This is, in fact, the declaration of all of the biblical witness, that God is bringing heaven to earth, and that there will come a day when all creation will finally and completely conform to his will and good pleasure. The question at hand, therefore, is whether or not you and I want to be a part of this kingdom.

Matthew will spend the rest of his Gospel telling us what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's a place where the poor in spirit find blessing, the grief-stricken know comfort, the hungry are fed, the pure in heart see God. The kingdom of heaven is like a great harvest. It's also like a tiny mustard seed, or a pinch of yeast, something so small that eventually grows into something unbelievably large. The kingdom of heaven is like a priceless treasure hidden in field, so valuable that the person who discovers it will give up all he has to gain it. It's a place where the overlooked in this life become great and the celebrities and power-brokers are reduced to nobodies. The kingdom of heaven is like a jobsite where the one who got hired at the end of the day is paid the same generous amount as the one who worked since dawn. And, of course, the kingdom is like a great wedding banquet, where everybody who comes, even the most questionable characters, finds that a seat of honor has been reserved for them.

Does that sound like a kingdom in which you would like to live? If so, Jesus makes clear that there is only one entrance requirement. Repentance. His declaration here is an invitation, but it's also a warning. Those who repent will enter into the kingdom. Those who do not, choose not to enter. Now, there is nothing particularly complicated about the word "repentance." Literally it means "to turn around" or "to change". It begins with a change of mind, but ultimately and necessarily leads to a change of living. I am headed one way in life, living life on my terms, but at some point I come to recognize that life on my own terms will never amount to anything (change of mind), and so I turn to begin trusting in Christ and living life on his terms, a citizen of his rule and reign in his kingdom.

This, by the way, is not simply a one-time action, but a life long pursuit. When Martin Luther sparked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation by nailing "The Ninety-Five Theses" to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral, the very first thing on the list was a reference to this very verse: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Repentance, continual repentance, is the way we make progress in the Christian life.¹ By God's grace, our minds have been changed, and then our lives begin to follow suit.

It's not by accident that in the very next verses Matthew records the calling of the first disciples. Jesus calls these fisherman to follow him and immediately they drop their nets and come after him. Isn't this repentance in action? And yet, are they different men now that they are following Jesus? Not really. Not at all, actually. As the story goes on, we see that they are still as imperfect as they were when Jesus found them on the seashore. The only difference is that they are now following Jesus on a journey in which he will eventually and progressively transform their entire lives from the inside out. I hear so many people say that they don't feel worthy to be a disciple of Jesus. That sort of statement betrays a total misunderstanding of discipleship. Repentance isn't about changing yourself, but about submitting to Christ who can change you as you cooperate with him.

I've always thought that one of the best New Testament examples of repentance was Zacchaeus. Here is this tax-collector, a terrible, terrible person, who has done treacherous things to his fellow Jews, who experiences the unmerited and surprising grace of Christ one day. Of all the people Jesus could have chosen from the crowd, he looks up at Zacchaeus in that tree and invites himself to his home. We don't know

¹ Tim Keller, <https://gospelchange.com/podcast/58-tim-keller-life-repentance/>

this man's backstory, but it could not have been pretty. What has to happen in your life to lead you to betray your own people and work for the hated enemy for our own financial gain. And yet, the grace of God, which is powerfully transformative, has its way with Zacchaeus. And it changes him. Not just his mind, but his life. He vows to give half his possessions to the poor and pay back four times any person he has cheated in the past. Jesus declares, "**Today salvation has come to this house.**"² The kingdom of God came near. Zacchaeus repented and took his place in the kingdom.

Every season is a season of repentance for the one who is seeking to follow Jesus. Advent stands as a brilliant opportunity for us to lean more intentionally into that repentance. It's one of the reasons why we shouldn't skip it. In an Advent devotional Esther and I read the other day, the writer put it this way:

One does not adequately prepare for the coming of Christmas by unpacking the attic boxes marked "decorations" in time for the tree and the company, only to be put away again until next December. Advent's preparations initiate ongoing disciplines to make room for the coming of Christ into our lives, our communities, and our churches. We make room for God's holy presence by sweeping out the unholy through the discipline of confession and repentance. We make room for Christ's incarnation among us by remembering that how we treat one another reflects how we treat our Lord.³

Everything in our culture works against this. The world around us doesn't skip Christmas. Instead, it starts Christmas in November and skips Advent. Even those of us aware of this season – and I assume you in that minority by the fact that you are here tonight – even we have a hard time slowing down long enough to invest the time for reflection and self-inventory that is needed for genuine repentance. It's hard to slow down when you're in the middle of a rushing current. Harder even still to turn around and swim the other way.

It's good that you're here tonight. This is a space we have set aside for repentance. It's good that many of you are setting aside time each day to read through Matthew's Gospel this season. It will be food for your soul. Along with gathering with your faith family for worship this season, that time in scripture may be the most important preparation you do. It's good that you are joining me in thinking about some of the images of this season, images like lights and tables, and trying to redeem them that they might direct us back to Christ.

In a moment we will allow some space for silence. Then we will gather together around the Lord's Table, another good place for repentance. I encourage you to take this rare opportunity to consider Jesus' invitation, or warning if you will. The kingdom of heaven truly is near. Sooner or later, it will be all that there is. What is your response? How is Christ calling you in your life tonight to repent, to turn around, to come after him, to allow him to change your mind and then help you in turn change your life?

Amen.

² Luke 19:9. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³ John Indermark, *Setting the Christmas Stage* (Upper Room Books, 2001).