

This winter we have had storm advisories and warnings about the freezing cold. In the US, they've had warnings too, of a political sort ... tell-tale signs of what might happen if one person or the other was elected president. Receiving these kinds of warnings is good and important. We want to know what's coming, how it might affect us, whether we might be in danger, and what we can do to protect ourselves if we are.

In this passage of Matthew's gospel, there was a clear warning that the kingdom of heaven was coming. It was coming to their hometown and they'd better get ready for it ... and not stand in the way.

Remember Jesus' words that Pauline read a few moments ago, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Repent doesn't mean to feel guilty or bad about yourself. In Greek the word is "metanoia" and all it means is *to turn*. If you were leaving your house and remembered you had forgotten your keys, you would *repent* and go back and get them (I have to do that quite often it seems). What Jesus is doing in his preaching when he calls people to repent is simply to invite them to turn to him. Turn your life around. Change your course. Do the work God intended you to do, namely the work of bringing God's light into the world.

By the way, Matthew's gospel uses the words "kingdom of heaven" instead of "kingdom of God." The word "heaven" would have been a more accessible word to his Jewish audience, a people who regularly avoided pronouncing the name of God out of reverence and respect. Matthew's use of the word "heaven" does not imply that Jesus is preaching about a physical place.

Matthew uses the phrase to show that God's kingdom has come near in the activity of Jesus. Through Jesus' coming, God moves in and among human beings and all creation.

This reminds me of what Aaron said in his sermon last week, that "through Jesus' coming, the dividing line between heaven and earth isn't quite as thick as we've been lead to believe. That in Jesus, it's become astonishingly thin."

Now, anyone who talked about a kingdom at that time, other than the kingdom under the rule of Roman emperor Tiberius Caesar, was placing themselves in danger of being seen as a revolutionary.

But Jesus was not your usual revolutionary. Jesus knew his contemporaries were not on the right track, that they were in fact, going in the wrong direction. They wanted the kind of revolution that used military force, one that would use violence over people to re-gain their land, power, and glory. They wanted to fight darkness with darkness and help God fulfill God's promise to them to rescue them and put everything right. Granted, they were willing to work for this kind of kingdom where God ruled, and they were prepared to die to see it happen... but it was not God's strategy, it was theirs.

Jesus had in mind a different kind of revolution. His was an internal revolution of the heart and mind, whose goal was to bring God's light and blessing into the world. Theologian NT Wright points out "that Matthew's gospel hooks up Jesus' early preaching with the prophecy of Isaiah that spoke about people in the dark being dazzled by sudden light." (Israel was in the dark, so to speak, as they were being held captive by the

Babylonians.) "Isaiah's prophecy went on to speak about the coming Messiah, through whom God would truly liberate Israel at last ... bringing in God's kingdom of light, peace, healing, and forgiveness, for themselves and for the world."

And so Jesus, the Messiah, is on a mission and on the move. Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea. He moved into a fishing village by the coast, in the very territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, in order to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy. These lands were given as a divine gift to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all their descendants, but during Jesus' time and the time when Matthew's Gospel was written (around the year 80 in the Common Era) the land and people were occupied by Roman imperial powers. It was another dark and oppressive time, but Matthew offers his readers hope as he reveals Jesus to be God's dawning light shining in the darkness of Roman rule.

In verse 19 and following, Jesus finds and calls Peter, Andrew, James and John. Immediately, they leave their nets and boats and follow him.

It's important to keep in mind that these disciples had already carved out pretty good lives for themselves. Fishing was their business. Rome asserted control over the land and sea, their production, and the marketing of their yields with contracts and taxes. They may not have made much money, but it *was* their livelihood. This was the life they knew, and they lived it day after day, year after year.

Until one particular ordinary day, when Jesus of Nazareth disrupts their lives, calls them to a different loyalty and way of life, creates a new community for them, and gives them a new mission -- fishing for people. Jesus is doing "kingdom of heaven" work, shining the light of heaven in unexpected places.

We read, "They immediately left their nets and followed him." What? Where are they going? How will they pay their bills? What about their jobs? Their families? What's the plan?" It is clear that they don't know the answers to any of these *responsible* questions. Their *only* plan is to follow Jesus.

How does Jesus get these men to drop their lives to follow him? It is not by convicting them of their sins. These men are not repentant sinners. That comes later. They are not seekers who have made a theological discovery about Jesus. That too, comes much later. At this point they know little about Jesus. We can't even say they have faith yet, and we certainly can't say that they understand where this journey will take them. But there is just something about Jesus that is so compelling. It's as if this was the call for which they had been waiting their whole lives.

Now, you and I know that the decision to start following Jesus is not a totally rational decision. In this regard, it's like other important decisions of life. Some of the most important commitments I've made in life have come about not because I made a list of pros and cons, but because something wonderful stirred inside me to say, "I have to do this!" "I want to do this."

Hmm, think about couples who are planning to marry. Have you ever asked them to describe to you why they want to get married, and why they feel they must make this commitment? Well, they may tell you lots of things about their similar values, life goals, and interests, but when it comes right down to why they must get married, they get a bit

gushy and sentimental. (OK, I confess I did that when someone asked me this question many years ago.)

Finally, they say something like, "We just know we have to do this." "We really want to do this." Right. Exactly right. Why do they later decide to have children? What rational process was at work then? It wasn't to save money or to sleep better at night. Why does anyone *choose* to raise a child? For the same reason a person gets married, and for the same reason a person rises to take a stand on an issue of justice, and for the same reason a person starts to follow Jesus. Because they know down deep that they are called to it, and the love that draws them.

The thing to remember is that the journey of those who follow Jesus Christ begins *not* with one's own decision, but with *his decision* to call us. These fishermen have not weighed the pros and cons of following and decided that Jesus will help them meet their goals in life. Matthew doesn't give us all the details, but somehow Peter, Andrew, James and John suddenly just *want* to follow the One who is calling them.

This event in scripture makes me think about why we baptize our children. Long before they are able to choose Jesus, the sacrament makes it clear that Jesus has chosen them. The difference is great. If the journey of faith begins with our choices, we will waver. We may worry, "Do I have enough faith? Was I right to follow? Who am I to follow?" Am I worthy? But if the journey begins with Jesus' call to us, then doubts about our faith become opportunities to discover more about Christ's faithfulness to us.

Here's another point about baptism in relation to Jesus' call to us: In baptism, God takes the risk first. Think about a love story you have read or one you have seen in a movie ... or maybe your own love story. At some point it occurs to the couple that they are in love. One day, one of the two decides to say, "I love you" to the other person. Maybe the man or woman planned on saying it, or maybe it just came up. But one of them took the risk to say, "I love you."

Then the risk-taker's "breathing stops," waiting for the response. And only one response will do. If the beloved one says, "Thank you," well, 'might as well end it right there and go home. You might decide to wait for a while to hear the words "I love you too," but you are never going to breathe easily until you do.

In baptism, God takes the risk. God says, "I love you" first. Then God waits, maybe for a really long time, for the child eventually to say, "I love you, too."

Whether our journeys in faith began as babies or later in life like those of these fishermen, it began because we were called to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Through baptism we enter the covenant God has established for all God's people. It's a relationship with God that gives us new life, nurtures us in love, gives us a Christian community to walk with us, and gives us boldness to be Christ's witnesses in the world.

Through faith we turn toward this Savior who says, "I love you," and we choose to receive a new life by saying, "I love you, too." So faith is a daily decision to turn away from our resolve to achieve a life for ourselves, and to turn toward the grace of receiving the life God has for us.

Following Jesus is not a one-time decision, but a daily choice. . . and one not without setbacks. Remember that when the disciples got discouraged with Jesus they turned back to the fishing boats and the life they once knew. But scripture points out

that they never caught anything until Jesus showed up and invited them to turn back to him.

In turning to follow Jesus, you probably have to leave some-thing behind. This is one of the central themes in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. You cannot turn toward God without turning away from something else that you once trusted.

Abraham and Sarah had to turn away from their comfortable life in Ur of the Chaldeans. Moses had to turn away from his comfortable retreat in the desert. Esther had to turn away from her hidden identity as a queen. David had to turn away from his anonymous life as a shepherd. James and John had to turn away from their father Zebedee and the family business. On the road to Damascus, Paul had to turn away from his religious pride as a Pharisee. Once that initial turn to God was made, all these people were caught up in the daily adventure of continuing to turn toward God, who kept leading them into a life they had never imagined.

What lifestyles and practices do you or I have to leave behind in order to follow Jesus? What does University Hill Congregation need to leave behind? The call to follow Jesus should cause us to feel uncomfortable, and we might even “get our guard up” because we are not immune to the temptations of living in an individualistic and consumerist culture that values entitlement, profit, and material wealth.

To follow Jesus means to follow the dreams he has for your life, for the church...and for the whole world. Only Jesus can lead you into his kingdom dreams for your life.

Every time you face a new situation on life’s journey, you are confronted with a choice. When things are confusing, difficult, and even overwhelming, you have to make a choice that reveals your faith. Will you turn back to the old life and the obtainable dreams? Or will you turn in faith to Jesus, saying, "I don't know where we are going, and I don't know how we will get there, but I will stay on the journey and stay in step with you because I know that I love you, too."