

Third Sunday after Epiphany January 25 2026

1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

I wonder if sometimes we forget that Jesus' ministry was public. That more than anything it was done out in the streets. In people's places of work, in the public marketplaces and squares, and in their synagogues.

I wonder if we forget that Jesus' message, what he proclaimed and what he taught, was not just about our private lives, but about people's whole lives. In this way, the public ministry of Jesus was political- in that it had to do with how the polis- the community- shaped its life together. It had to do with ultimate allegiance. A decision that in Jesus' day put his followers in conflict with the prevailing government of Rome and their proxies.

This challenge of ultimate allegiance is different from playing politics in that it did not seek to overthrow a government. Several times across the gospels Jesus is offered the chance to lead a political revolt, to become a king, a ruler. And he refuses. When confronted by Pilate in the Gospel of John about being a king, Jesus clarifies that his kingdom was not of this world. If it were, his folks would have broken him out of jail a long time ago.

And yet, Jesus is ultimately killed by the political authorities, because there is something in his message, his call for people to declare their ultimate allegiance to God, that frightens them. Especially when people actually begin to live according to that reign, not that of Rome.

In our text today, John is arrested, and Jesus goes to Galilee. The very place where the man who arrested John, Herod, rules. Jesus goes into that region and begins to proclaim the same message John the Baptist

proclaimed. Repent (change your thinking), for the kingdom of heaven (The reign of God) has come near.

In Matthew, the “Kingdom/Reign of Heaven” is interchangeable with Reign of God. In the Jewish mind, the Reign of God is what it means to be ruled directly by God. In this context, the Reign of Heaven has an inherently anti-Rome and anti-establishment message. Not because it calls the people to overthrow that government and rule in its place, but because the values, the social order based on how God has always called people to live is so contrary to that of Rome and the establishment. God’s reign is characterized by justice and fairness. By caring for the most vulnerable in the land- widows, orphans, the poor, those who are strangers in their land. The last is because the Jews knew what it was like to live as slaves. To live as strangers in a strange land. And God reminds them of the humanity of even those who weren’t born our next door neighbors.

Jesus’ message is that this rule of God is at hand. So close you can feel its breath on your cheek. And since it is so close, and since that reign is so different from Rome’s, the call to repentance could also be understood as a call to choose an allegiance. Who are you going to follow? Whose values? Whose laws?

This question of choosing is one we have heard before in scripture. Joshua before he dies 24:15, “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua also gives the Israelites a

choice- to follow the gods of this world or serve the God who brought them out of slavery. Who freed them. But whose ways are different from the rest of the world. Choose who you will follow.

JJ, one of our Bridge students on Wednesday wondered why Simon and Andrew, James and John followed Jesus immediately. It's a great question!

Following up on JJ's question I asked those assembled, what gets us moving immediately? And Crystal responded- fear and excitement. It's a great answer isn't it? What gets us moving without thinking is often fear or excitement. I once went from fast asleep with my full CPAP gear on under the covers- to downstairs in our kitchen with glasses on and ready to go when I heard Karen scream. Fear got me moving immediately, without thought.

Have you ever been so excited for something you rushed ahead. Moved to hurry up and get to the place where would meet that person, see the show, take in the view. Right?

Why do the brothers move quickly? Is it fear, or excitement? Why respond immediately to Jesus, who is proclaiming the message of a man already arrested, who is ultimately asking them where their ultimate allegiance lies- to Rome or to God. And it is a choice. It's possible that Simon and Andrew and the sons of Zebedee would have purchased a lease or contract with Rome's agents that allows them to fish and obliges them to supply a certain quantity of fish in support of the Empire. So, by fishing the Sea of Galilee they support, in some small way, Rome's economic interests. They are choosing Rome.

By leaving their nets and choosing Jesus, the brothers show their ultimate allegiance is to God's rule not Rome's. They choose to "fish" their land and the people in it for God's purposes rather than using it for Rome's gain. They choose to join Jesus' ministry in the Promised Land rather than to align themselves with the interests of the occupiers. Rome wanted the men to catch fish to advance their agenda. Jesus wants them to catch people for God's rule, which as Jesus will demonstrate throughout the rest of the Gospel, is a rule of mercy and justice and plenty.

Yes, Rome has brought peace to the Western world. The Pax Romana. But it comes at the tip of a sword, the price of government scrutiny if you speak against their policies, the promise of a cross if you challenge their rule.

God's reign, as Jesus will go on to describe in his Sermon on the Mount, is different. It is a way that, as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians, "is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." For in this reign God's greatest power is Jesus on the cross. This reign of God says that you love not just those who benefit you, who look and talk and think like you, but all human beings. Even those who would seek to do you harm. This is foolishness to Romans. But God's power active in the world. God's power to transform the world. And it does.

When we see justice and mercy at work. When there is love unbounded by hatred. Where people are seen first and foremost as human beings created in God's image. Then, we will have glimpsed the reign of God. It has come so close to us it has brushed against our cheek.

And as followers of Jesus, when we see the opposite of that taking place in the world. We are called to speak. Publicly. As Jesus did. In the marketplaces. In the public squares. In places of worship. At the very least to say clearly, that is not the reign of God. Just as Jesus did to the Pharisees and scribes so many times. As he did when he released the woman caught in adultery. As he did when he stopped Peter from violently resisting his arrest.

It is a bit of a conundrum, that our first allegiance is to God and God's reign even as we continue to be citizens of earthly nations. But Jesus is clear on this. The only person who rules in God's reign is God. And for that reason, no human government, even one that is purportedly Christian, can reign in God's stead. Because that never turns out well. Just look at what happened when the Israelites tried to have their own earthly king. Sure there were some great years, but ultimately each of them strayed from the boundaries of the reign of God. They began to live as any other secular king would, thinking that they could do anything because they were king and of course it was righteous because they ruled a Holy Land and a Holy People. And they thought that right up until the Babylonians knocked over their walls and took them from the promised land.

Friends, in the waters of baptism and through God's Holy Spirit- God has claimed you as beloved children, fearfully and wonderfully made. Gifted in unique and amazing ways for ministry in God's reign. The love and mercy and grace that comes with that is unearned. A free gift. Otherwise, it wouldn't be grace.

But, as followers of Jesus, as those who play follow the leader with him, we also follow him into the public square and proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ in word and in deed. Just as Martin Luther King Jr. and those in the Civil Rights movement did. Proclaiming that the treatment of people with dark skin as second class citizens, as something less than fully bearing the image of God, was not just illegal but it was contrary to the reign of God. Just as the population of Denmark did when they worked together to save over 95% of their Jewish population from deportation by the Nazi's to concentration camps. Just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer did in Nazi Germany where he thought it was the churches duty to actively resist policies that sought to overtake the church and make it into an arm of the state and not an outpost of the reign of God. Where he believed it was the church's duty to actively resist policies that sought the scapegoating of members of that society.

Friends, God has already claimed us and called us beloved in the waters of baptism. God has looked us in the eyes and said, with you I am well pleased. So, when we are faced daily with those decisions that will show our ultimate allegiance. How do we respond. Immediately? Even if with fear and trembling?

May this these words of Christ and our mutual conversation and pondering of them, may this Meal of Christ's own Body and Blood given and shed on the cross for the world and for our freedom, may God's Holy Spirit active in and through each of these things guide us to respond according to God's will this day and always. Amen.