

*Coming Of The King –
Announced*

Matthew 4:12-17

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If it were a case of auditioning, Jesus would be getting it all wrong.

If Jesus had to submit the first steps of his ministry to the *So You Think You Can Dance* panel of celebrity judges for critical review, the answer would have been a collective thumbs-down.

He'd have been voted right off the program.

You'll need to remember that *Matthew* is the gospel written to the Jewish segment of the Church. It is written to those who are the religious insiders. They'd known the story of God's work among his people for years. They could quote it. They grew up with it.

And if you were a Jewish religious insider, the one thing you knew for sure was that God worked through His people. His mercies were for them. Outsiders were able to participate *if* they came, and *if* they were converted.

The centre of religious life was Jerusalem.

The holy place of spiritual activity was the Temple.

That's just the way it was.



So – where does Jesus go?

Where does he launch his ministry?

Capernaum.

In Zebulun and Naphtali.

Which happens to be the north country.

In some ways the North was home.

Jesus grew up there. In Nazareth.

He'd been in Judea for some time.

That's where he was baptized.

That's where he faced off against the Devil.

Then John the Baptist gets arrested.

And Jesus leaves.

He heads north.

John's era of preparation prophecy has come to a close, says Matthew.

It is time for the era of Jesus and his ministry to begin.

And it will happen **up north**.

He stops in at his hometown of Nazareth, but is not welcome.

You can read about that at the end of chapter 13.

So, he sets up his ministry centre in Capernaum.

There the hills of the Sermon on the Mount are found.

Bethsaida is there. Magdala. Chorazin. The Sea of Galilee. Cana.

All in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

And **that** move was a total loser of a move.

Nobody in their right mind, with any sort of half-formed religious understanding, would give a thumbs-up to establishing a productive, fruitful ministry **there!**

The North country had been the first region in Israel to lose their spiritual moorings hundreds of years before. And they were the first to go into captivity – 100 years before the southern tribes. They were far from Jerusalem, and were never the spiritual centre of the nation. So, not a real surprise that they wandered.

Being on the edge of Jewish territory, there was also a sizeable Gentile population here.

The Romans built the city of Tiberius here.

Their army garrison was in Capernaum.

The Greek city Sephoris was just north of Nazareth.

Making the whole region rather cosmopolitan.

And giving it a rather odd moral, social, and spiritual flavour.

If you lived in Jerusalem, you'd view it with great suspicion.

No real culture up there.

No religious purity up there.

No university or great school up there.

There had been, in recent years, some failed attempts at rebellion against Rome up there.

Yes, Galilee left the rest of the nation shaking its collective head.

And so it is that John ch.1 tosses out the phrase, "*Can anything good come out of Galilee?*"

And **that** is where Jesus heads.

So, yes - for all appearances, he was going wrong.

Impure.

Ignorant.

Immoral.

Unstable.

C'mon, Jesus, why bother?

You're wasting your time.

It's all wrong.

Matthew makes the very deliberate point that, in fact,

Jesus' ministry was going

all **right**,

not wrong.

Jesus, actually, is continuing the thread that began right in the opening chapter of the Gospel.

Chapter one we read his family tree – which included four significant surprises.

Remember what they were?

Women.

Women from away. Non Jewish women.

Women whose lives had, in various ways, issues.

Sovereign God welcomes them into the family of Jesus.

Chapter two – double surprise here. The religious insiders get wind of the Messiah's birth.... and decide to stay away. That's #1. And, surprise #2, the obedient ones who obey the prompting of God, who come and worship, are the outsiders, the ones who dabble in shady practices of fortune telling and occult. The Magi bow before Jesus as one would bow before a king. They worship him.

That same thread now continues here in chapter four.

Jesus could have launched his ministry, providing his core preaching and teaching at the religious centre of the Jewish universe in Jerusalem. He could have healed devout pilgrims praying in the temple courts, longing for God's touch.

Instead he goes north.

He goes to the place

with a checkered past,

with a dubious present,

and a no-hope future.

Matthew tells us that long ago Isaiah the prophet had sensed this would happen - Isaiah 8 & 9 – that the part of Israel that first was overrun and brutalized by evil invaders, would be the first to also see the Light of Release. He quotes it.

Remember the deal with prophecy – the onion thing? Multiple layers of meaning?

So – yes – they saw light when some were able to return at the end of the period of Old Testament exile. A few straggled back to their homes over the years. Not many. Not enough to restore tribal identity – hence we speak today of the "lost tribes of Israel." But enough that the Scripture reports some of them coming

to worship at the temple in later years.

But peel that back, and you'll discover another layer of meaning. Matthew tells us that the fullest fulfilment of Isaiah 8&9 happens when Jesus comes to live up north.

Isaiah speaks of a people who sat in darkness.
of those who sat in the shadow of death.

Can you imagine the picture?

Of someone in total darkness. No stars. No candle. Can't see the hand in front of their face. Afraid to move for fear they'll hit something.

So they sit down.
Stuck in the darkness.

The zealot movement had been brutally crushed – crucifixions were not uncommon, and Jesus probably grew up seeing them at the side of the road.

The religious leaders that had travelled north and established synagogues, had built up layer upon layer over top of the Old Testament Law. No one, except for them of course, could ever imagine how they could please God. All gentiles and half-breeds were obviously to be left to the side.

Physical death.
Political and social oppression.
Religious heaviness.

People stuck in that sort of life are **precisely** the ones to whom Jesus **wants** to come.
That is **exactly** the sort of situation and community into which the glory of God is ready to break open.

Jesus himself says it very bluntly in chapter 9 -
that he came to call not the righteous, but sinners (9:13).

It is a core value in the Kingdom and Church of Jesus.

It is not there for its own convenience.
Nor to celebrate its own brilliance.
Or enjoy its own comforts.
Or perpetuate its own existence.

It is there to reach into the dark and broken places,
to people that leave others shaking their heads,
people that others might walk right by,
to bring eternal light and hope into their darkness.

Where others might walk past a situation and call it a total waste of time,
Heaven looks and says, "That's where I'm going."

A core value of the Kingdom of God.

So, when a group of Jesus-followers get the sense that their apprenticeship to Him is calling them into a desert slum somewhere outside Lima, Peru, to share Jesus with people that might well live and die without anyone hardly noticing,

Heaven doesn't say, "What a waste of time."
It applauds.

And, when a group of apprentices to Christ figure that the best way they could spend a summer is by partnering with some people that happen to have Special Needs through intensive ministry SERVE experiences,

Heaven doesn't say, "They may not even remember. A poor use of resources."
It provides spiritual backing.

And when congregations band together through their deacons and say, "We're going to embrace survivors of the AIDS-devastation in Africa"

Heaven doesn't say, "They brought it on themselves. Leave them."
It blesses resources, so that light shines in dark places.

And when someone says, "Hey, lets fill up baby bottles with donations to support new mums that are in a really tough spot"

Heaven doesn't say, "They should learn to fend for themselves"
It whispers, "Yes!"

And when believers say, "Yes, sign me up to lead worship" – even when the congregation over at Extendicare Nursing Home is made up of people who have trouble hearing, can't see very good, who sometimes interrupt with a comment or grunt, and whose cognitive ability and memory is often in real trouble,

Heaven doesn't roll its eyes and say, "Couldn't you do better?"
It says, "As much as you've done this to one of the least of these my children...."

Do you see?

Heaven calls Jesus, and Christ-followers, to go north into the proverbial regions of Zebulun and Naphtali. Into the dark places.

Which **ALSO** means.....

that if you're feeling like your life is a wreck,
that you're stuck in a dark place,
if you're not feeling like you can take a step forward because you're not at all sure where to go, and perhaps feel like – instead – you may just fall into a hole of some sort and land in even deeper than you are now

if you're feeling beat up,
if you feel like you'd fit right into Zebulun and Naphtali,
go ahead and call to Jesus.

Because, contrary to what your own head may be telling you, God has **not** overlooked you.
And he is **not** condemning you.

The Jesus who went north is the same Jesus who is alive today, and who sends His Spirit to work in north-like places and lives.

Reach to him.
Keep reaching.
Keep calling.
Don't be afraid to ask others to reach and call with you.
Including us here at Calvin.
It's why we're here as a community.

Right, congregation?

Here's a challenge – if anyone ever catches me saying, "Yes, that's a great idea, but I'm not sure how well that would serve our members"
call me on it!

If you hear each other say, "Well, we do need to take care of our own homes first"
challenge that!

If you're looking at the ministry of this congregation and all you can see is stuff that serves our own well-being and interests, tap your elders and deacons on the shoulder and ask a question or two.

Friends, the city of Ottawa is NOT unlike the land of Zebulun and Nathtali -
Cosmopolitan.

Lots of strange ideas floating around.
Plenty of hopeless situations just outside our doorstep.

And our reason for existence is to be exactly like that of Him who first set his sights deliberately on that so-called throw-away, waste-of-time region in the North.

To bring light.
To give hope.

And if we can't point to any ways in which that is happening.... in our own lives and in our collective life as a congregation – then we'd better scurry along to the last verse of the reading. In fact, let's do that right now.

You know, if this reading were an advertisement of life and values in the world of Jesus and Heaven - then the last verse, the little one sort of quickly pasted onto the end of the story would be the tag line.

In marketing the "tag line" is the phrase that summarizes what the product or organization is all about.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

That's Jesus' tag line.

That summarizes absolutely everything that will follow in the Gospel.

Two things it isn't -

It doesn't mean, "*OK, now is the time to start feeling bad and guilty.*"
Which sometimes is what we think "Repent" means.

And it doesn't mean, "*OK, forget everything about this life and earth. Focus on the after-life in some other dimension called heaven.*"

Which is what we might be tempted to think "Kingdom of heaven" means.

Repent means, very literally – "*Turn!*" or "*Change!*"

Like your car's GPS, squawking at you when you've missed your intersection.

"Turn around at next available intersection."

"Turn around at next available intersection."

"Turn around at next available intersection."

Get off the road you're on, because it's going the wrong way.

You'll end up where you don't want to be.

Change course!

And

Kingdom of heaven was the traditional, respectful Jewish way of speaking about God's rule and authority without having to mention his name at all.

Means the same thing as Mark and Luke and John mean with "Kingdom of God."

It refers to the claim of God's authority over every square inch and every living thing everywhere.

His rule.

And the Cosmos as his realm.

It is a kingdom that comes not so much through a place.

But in a person.

In the person of Jesus.

If your life is headed the wrong way, CHANGE!

Because God's powerful authority has come in Jesus

your life, your city, your church

is not exempt from his claim of authority over you.

You will answer to him one day.
So if you know there is a change needed, then....

CHANGE!

We can't slow down or change the coming.
That's a done deal.
Rather, Matthew's question to us is -
 Will we choose to respond?
 Will we make the changes we are called to make?

Can I be honest?
I don't like change so much.
Used to be a lot more OK with it than I am today.
Stiffening up a bit over the years, I guess.

Change takes work.
Change leaves uncertainty.
Change means learning new habits (**hard**) and unlearning others (**even harder**).

But -
 I don't think I have any choice.
 If I'm going to be reading **any** further in the Gospel of Matthew, I will be faced with the call to make changes. What they precisely are I can't say quite yet.
 Jesus doesn't name them here.
 Just gives the warning that change **will** come.

If I want "in" with Jesus, to be counted as one of his, then I'll need to take seriously his claim of authority over my life.
 He the King.
 Me the subject.
 And if he calls for change, I'll need to make it.
 Period.

You, too.

So.....
 Want to keep reading?
 Do you dare?
 Come back next week, if you do.