

If Jesus Began There, Perhaps God Is Not Absent Here
(Epiphany 3)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Matthew 4:12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—
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.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

If Jesus Began There, Perhaps God Is Not Absent Here

I don't know about you, but it feels an awful lot like the land of shadows that Isaiah describes is exactly where we find ourselves these days. I've never been a big fan of the news. It overwhelms me, and I've learned that it tends to resolve itself given enough time. But I have found it particularly harrowing this past week as we've seen images of a five-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl being taken from their families and communities; as we've heard of doors being kicked in, schools going on lock-down, people being shot, and an operation in Portland, Maine called "Operation Catch of the Day," which feels like a perverse interpretation of Jesus's call to be fishers of people in our reading for this morning.

My gut reaction is to withdraw and to block it all out. I want to believe that if we just wait for a new administration or a policy shift, this will all go away. But the numbers tell a different story. Recent polls show that almost 40% of Americans support these raids and the violence being used to carry them out. That means 40% of our neighbors, our coworkers, maybe even people we love, don't see a problem here. This isn't just a political disagreement; it is a breakdown of our shared humanity. We are wrestling with a national mindset that has decided some lives are worth more than others—a mindset that sees strangers not as neighbors but as threats.

If I'm being completely honest, it sometimes leaves me struggling to recognize the God I know in the nation I'm seeing. I keep looking for the God I learned about in Sunday school, and what I see doesn't match. Because how can God be present in a society where so many people—even those who claim the name of Christ—seem to believe that hostility is a virtue and cruelty is simply the cost of order? If the people who are supposed to reflect God's light are the ones defending the shadow, it makes me wonder if God has left the building.

But our scripture for this morning argues otherwise. And it makes its case not through a grand theological argument, but through an obscure geographical detail. The author of Matthew's gospel tells us that when Jesus heard John the Baptist had been arrested, he withdrew to the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. In Jesus' time, this area was called Galilee, but Matthew uses these ancient names to remind the reader of a painful history. In the days of the prophets, these northern regions were the "front door" of Israel—the border where every invading army entered the land. Every time families were deported and lives were torn apart, it started right there.

But the tradition remembered something even more painful: the people of Israel believed these invasions happened because the people had failed to keep covenant with God. They had failed to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. In national memory, Zebulun and Naphtali were 'shadowlands'—regions defined by deportation, occupied lives, and the haunting suspicion that the people had strayed too far from God's promise to ever be found again.

And this—this—is where Jesus begins his ministry. Not in Jerusalem, the holy city. Not in the temple, the center of religious life. Not in some pristine, untouched place where God's presence was obvious and uncomplicated. No, Jesus begins his ministry in the shadowlands. In the places where people had asked: Where is God? And the harder question: What does it say about us that this is happening at all?

That harder question is the one that haunts me: Not just: Where is God when families are being torn apart? But: Where is God when so many of our neighbors believe this is justified? Not just: How can God allow this? But: How can God be present in a society where fear and cruelty are defended as necessary?

And Matthew's answer is not abstract. It's not philosophical. It's geographical. Matthew isn't going to tell us how God is going to fix it—he doesn't give us political strategy or philosophical explanation. Instead, he gives us a location and insists, this is where Christ's ministry begins.

Christ's ministry begins in the very places where moral failure and human suffering overlap. It begins in the very societies where people have lost their way, where fear has become policy and strangers have become enemies.

And the first thing Jesus says in that place is not condemnation. It is not an explanation. It is not even comfort. It is a call to repentance: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Used in this context, repentance isn't a call for guilt, shame, or moral scolding. It is a call to change direction, to turn around, to reorient oneself. It is a call to stop moving in the same direction just because it's familiar or sanctioned or widely accepted. It is an invitation to turn.

And this is where the story turns from geography to vocation.

Because Matthew does not let Jesus remain alone in Zebulun and Naphtali for long. Almost immediately, Jesus begins to call others—not to escape this place, not to rise above it, not to purify themselves away from it—but to participate in what God is already doing right there. To become fishers of people.

Because in the world Jesus inhabits, fishing is not about conquest. It is not about sorting the worthy from the unworthy or deciding which lives are expendable for the sake of order or security. Fishing is about sustenance. It is about survival. It is about feeding bodies, families, communities. It is about knowing the water well enough to work with it rather than against it. Fishing is patient, embodied, communal work. Nets are mended together. Boats are shared. And the catch of the day? It's not a slogan for a raid. It's dinner. It's what gets shared with the neighbor who came up empty.

In the empire's eyes, a 'catch' is something you hunt, ensnare, and extract. But for a fisherman, a net is how you hold a community together. So when Jesus says, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of people,' he is wresting that metaphor back from the powerful. He is saying that in God's kingdom, we don't 'catch' people to remove them; we 'catch' them to keep them.

Which means this call is not about extraction. It is about connection. It is not about removing people from their lives. It is about drawing them into community. It is not about catching and discarding. It is about holding, sustaining, belonging.

To be a fisher of people, in Jesus' sense, is to do what fishermen do: to stay in one place, to learn the waters, to tend the nets. It is to pay attention. To notice who is hungry. To mend what has been torn. To refuse the lie that some lives are disposable for the sake of others' comfort.

And that brings us back—uncomfortably, inevitably—to this place. This moment.

Because if Jesus begins in the places where God is assumed to be absent, and if Jesus calls disciples not to flee those places but to participate in God's work there, then the question before us is not whether this moment is too dark or too compromised for God to be present. The question is whether we are willing to follow Jesus into it.

And that is not always an easy question. It would be simpler if the work of discipleship were limited to charity at a safe distance, compassion without cost, or prayers that do not require us to stand too close to the pain. It would be easier if repentance meant only personal morality rather than collective reorientation—if we could focus just on making sure we were facing the right direction rather than having to figure out how to bring others along with us.

But Jesus does not offer that kind of ease.

Jesus offers a call that begins with turning—turning toward the places we would rather avoid, turning toward the people we have been taught to fear or dismiss, turning toward the uncomfortable truth that God may be at work precisely where we would prefer God not be.

To be clear: this is not a call to heroics. It is not a demand that every one of us become a frontline activist or put ourselves in harm's way. Jesus calls different people differently. But it is a call to let our lives be reoriented—to ask, honestly and prayerfully, what it means to live as people who believe that no place and no person is beyond the reach of God's light.

And perhaps the hardest thing to hear is that Jesus doesn't only show up for the people being harmed. He shows up for the people who have looked away. Jesus' ministry is for people like us—people who have to reckon with the ways we benefit from the very systems that create suffering and cast shadows. He doesn't go there to shame us; he goes there to wake us up, to help us see the light. Repentance is not only for "them." It is for us. For the ways we benefit, the ways we look away, the ways we allow fear and convenience to shape our imagination more than love.

And repentance is for the ways we stop seeing each other. For the ways we decide that people who disagree with us are stupid or cruel or beyond reach. The work of turning isn't just about standing against injustice. It's also about refusing to let contempt become our own kind of wall. If we believe that no person is beyond the reach of God's light, then we don't get to decide who's too far gone—not the stranger at the border, and not the neighbor in the pew.

Repentance, in this sense, is not about wallowing in guilt. It is about waking up. It is about turning toward a different way of being human together. It is about learning, slowly and imperfectly, how to live as if the kingdom of heaven is, in fact, near.

And that kingdom looks nothing like raids named after fishing metaphors that reduce human beings to a catch. It looks nothing like children taken from driveways or parents detained at worksites. It looks nothing like fear enforced at gunpoint.

The kingdom Jesus proclaims looks like neighbors refusing to let one another disappear. It looks like communities choosing solidarity over suspicion. It looks like people willing to stand in public places and say, This is not who we want to be.

To be a fisher of people, then, is not to decide who is in and who is out. It is to help create the conditions where life can flourish. It is to cast nets of care and accompaniment, not to ensnare but to sustain. It is to trust that God is already present and at work—and to ask how our lives might align with that work.

Which brings us, finally, to the title of this sermon: If Jesus began there, perhaps God is not absent here.

Perhaps God is present in the very questions that keep us awake at night. Perhaps God is present in the discomfort that refuses to let us look away. Perhaps God is present when we learn our neighbor's name before we know their documentation status or what political party they affiliate with. Perhaps God is present when we choose the longer, harder conversation over the comfortable silence.

This is the work of mending nets. Of sustaining community. Of refusing to let our neighbors disappear.

This is the work of those who stay. And we stay trusting that the same light that dawned in the land of deep shadow is still dawning, even now, even here.

Thanks be to God.