

“Jesus on the Move”
Matthew 4:12-25

Jesus was on the move. I mean, Jesus was literally on the move. All those places that we know, primarily from the Christmas narrative and other familiar texts, like Bethlehem or Nazareth now seem like things of the past. Galilee or even more specific, Capernaum, was now Jesus' home. Moving is hard. Some of you know this better than anyone, especially if you moved numerous times in your life. Or maybe you lived in the city once and drove, to what you thought was the end of the world, to arrive somewhere in Georgina or Bradford or Newmarket. It may seem like “home”, now because this is where you reside, sleep, buy groceries and worship. But where you came from, was home. I never imagined, when I left Truro to take a train to Toronto to come to Bible College that I would still be here, over 30 years ago now (with a couple of stints back in the Maritimes). Allyson and I began living next door to our student charge in Sutton – right on Dalton Road across from – what was then The Blue Moose Bar. Fights in the parking lot, drunk guys singing “Islands in the Stream” on karaoke night and humid summers nearly killed us, but we had moved. Then to Oakmeadow Blvd where Lily arrived and where kids hung out to all hours in the park, right beside us smoking (what is now legal). But we were not quite done because again we packed up and went back to Sutton to live in the home we have lived for ten years. Jesus move only a few miles and it may sound strange to us, especially in our modern day transient society, but then, such a move, was not so typical, but then again Jesus was not typical. Most first century people would live and die in the community of their ancestors but not Jesus. We may surmise why Jesus was on the move. Maybe it had to do with John the Baptist's arrest (and soon to be execution – but we don't know that yet) or maybe it had to do with the realty market - as in “location, location, location.” Although Capernaum was small, geographically speaking, (50 miles long and 10 miles wide a strip) where Jesus was going was the most densely populated, most racially diverse, most theologically hungry area of the Middle East, and which also happened to be the exact spot where prophets had foretold Messiah would go. So maybe we can understand Jesus being on the move. But then again we can also understand Jesus' message as well because it sounds strikingly similar, no I should say identical, to the message of his cousin, John the Baptist, “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” (3:2 & 4:17)

You may wonder about this “message”. It sounds more like an Old Testament prophesy than a New Testament message but then again John fits the mold of a prophet over a disciple. And for Matthew's Jesus to teach the same message as John may leave us a little “surprised” because John seems more hell-fire and brimstone than our moderate Jesus. I mean, you see Jesus spending more time with the down and outers rather than the up and comers, showing grace to the sinful rather than

judging the holy. Don't get me wrong Jesus asked people to "repent", like when he told the woman caught in adultery to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11) but this doesn't seem to be Jesus' "primary" message as it was for John. And what is Jesus speaking about when he speaks of the Kingdom? Israel had known countless kings, even kings who had been crowned by God himself but Jesus could not have been any further than any king the people had ever known or read about. Kings are not born in stables but palaces; Not children of peasants but royalty; Not associating with commoners but with the well-known. So what kind of kingdom could Jesus possibly be referring to and why the Kingdom of Heaven? "Kingdom of God" seems to be more familiar to our ears and rolls off our tongues more easily. But remember Matthew was a good Jew, writing primarily to other good Jews who did not take the "name" of God lightly. Even modern day Orthodox Jews following in this tradition, to this day, when referring to God, cannot even spell God as you and I spell it – G O D but write it out as G space D because even writing God's holy name could defile G space D. So, many theologians surmise this is why Matthew uses "heaven" rather than "God" which he sees as synonymous. So don't see Matthew's use of heaven (at least here) as the "place we go after we die" or the location "where we sing, 'Holy, Holy, Holy' day in and day out" or "where we walk the streets of gold" or "golf everyday" or "whatever you imagine it to be" but the kingdom of heaven as a movement, a movement with followers.

And Jesus is again on the move – not just moving to a new home but "walking" (4:18) by the Sea of Galilee. But it's there that Jesus spots his first kingdom followers. Now if you are walking along the beach you will find certain types of people, just as if Jesus was walking in the midst of a city or up the aisle at the local synagogue. All locations have "typical" people. So it should not surprise us that as Jesus "walked along the shore of Galilee (4:18) he would find those who made their living from the sea but even more, according to William Barclay, those who had the qualities needed to become Jesus' disciples. Fishermen, for example, are typically "patient" people. Fishermen have to wait patiently for the fish to take the bait. If you can't wait you go home empty handed. Fishermen also must demonstrate "perseverance". Rewards are slow to come when one fishes and rewards only come to those who persevere. Fishermen, especially those who fish far from land must also have "courage." Fishermen leave the safety of the shore to go out, often in rough waters and beyond the sight of land, to fish. Good fishermen display courage. Fishermen also must have "an eye for the right moment." To make your move to catch fish a little too early or a little too late means catching nothing vs. catching something. And finally fishermen know the "best bait" to use. If someone then has patience, perseverance, courage, a good eye and skill, chances are they can be good fishers but according to Jesus they could become good fishers of men and women as well. Such parabolic

language is not new to Jesus. When speaking with those who knew a thing or two about carpentry he would tell them to build their lives on a solid foundation. (Matt 27:24-25) When speaking with those familiar with agriculture he would share about the importance of seeds falling on fertile ground. (Matt 13:8-26) And when addressing hungry people Jesus became the “Bread of Life.” (John 6:25-59) So why not tell these fishermen that they were not invited to give up their career, necessarily, but to use their skills for a godly or kingdom purpose? It’s no wonder then that 4 men, who had not been chosen to be an actual followers of a Rabbi when they were young teens because they were they were not the best or brightest, but would now, as adults, jump into the water (pun intended) when Jesus asks them to come and follow him. They were seen as failures then, and as ordinary now but in Jesus’ eyes were seen as worthy and full of potential because Jesus chose them. It may answer the question of why Simon and his brother Andrew along with James and his brother John even listened to this itinerant preacher in the first place but it doesn’t quite answer their surprising response. I say “surprising” because I’m not sure if I would have done what they did. When Matthew clarifies that they “left” to “follow” Jesus we need to understand what they left. Simon and Andrew left “their” nets but even more James and John left the family business because Matthew makes it known that the boat they were fishing in actually belonged to their father Zebedee and not some random employer. So for all 4 to simply leave (which Matthew makes it sound like it was immediate) the cost was great but the reward even greater!

In just a few verses Matthew gives us a taste of what these disciples would see and participate in when they left everything to follow Jesus. It’s a taste that leaves us longing for more so we read on and it doesn’t disappoint, for Jesus is again on the move. Jesus did not remain in Capernaum, you may notice, but “went throughout Galilee” (4:23). The disciples saw cures, for example, from diseases, pains, demon possession and even healings of long standing physical disablements. No wonder Jesus “fame” spread as Matthew tells us and why “great crowds” now followed him along with the original 4. And then again (in an often overlooked phrase) we notice Matthew mention the “kingdom of heaven” (4:23) but this time the message seems different. Remember the first time Matthew speaks about Jesus’ teaching he says Jesus called people to “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (4:17) Now I’ve already addressed the “kingdom of heaven” but I didn’t speak about repentance and it needs some clarification at this point. Repentance is not a word we “use” as much in the church today, maybe because it seems “out of date” or to others, “offensive”. Repentance gives the picture that maybe we’ve heard about, seen with our eyes, or watched in Hollywood movies of the person embarrassed and ashamed coming to the front of the church to profess a “sin” they’ve been caught in to those who do the same sin but just haven’t been caught yet.

But this is not the image that Matthew wants us imagine. I know this because of Matthew's slight change in his wording when he speaks about Jesus' teaching in their synagogues. Matthew says that Jesus "proclaimed the good news of the kingdom." (4:23) Matthew eliminates the words "repentance" with "good news." Good news which literally means "gospel."

Now don't get me wrong. It's not that Jesus no longer speaks on repentance but that repentance, he wants us to understand is good news. Repentance is good news because repentance is really a "turning about". Repentance is not simply words of confession but a transformative change in direction – a turning to a life all of us could only dream about. And Jesus is again on the move. We, the church, is Jesus on the move - people sharing the same message Jesus proclaimed. Like Jesus and the disciples we must be willing to leave the safety of the shore and the complacency of fishing for food and begin fishing for people. We must be willing to leave the apathy of simply surviving to a life of thriving as we live out the gospel call within our family, our neighbourhoods, our places of work, and our social circles. This is what it means to be Kingdom people doing (large K) Kingdom building. So we too must be on the move. To do anything else is to miss what it means to truly leave everything and follow Jesus. But let's not forget the message, the same message Jesus delivered so long ago.

It's a message of grace and hope. It's not about condemning people but about inviting people into a life that makes all the difference. It's about helping people catch a glimpse that life is better with Jesus. If people see in us a life of joy amidst despair, a life of purpose in a world that lacks meaning, a life of abundance amidst a life that might not appear to have "much" (at least with what the world sees as important) then they will see Jesus on the move in us. And if Jesus is on the move then the kingdom of heaven has come. Thanks be to God! Amen.