

**Matthew 4:12-23.** <sup>12</sup> When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. <sup>13</sup> Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— <sup>14</sup> to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: <sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— <sup>16</sup> the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” <sup>17</sup> From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” <sup>18</sup> As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, <sup>22</sup> and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. <sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

### **The Kingdom of Heaven Comes Near**

- 1. To those living in the shadows of death a light has dawned**
- 2. To those just living life, life has new meaning**

A classmate of mine is in Israel right now. He is posting all sorts of interesting pictures online for us back home to see - including pictures of the Sea of Galilee. It is interesting to see this place that the Gospel accounts talk about so frequently. It is a place that has a simple serene beauty to it. Probably better described as a lake, hills surround the Sea of Galilee, creating this shallow basin where waters spread out under the Middle Eastern sky. And even though this has become a popular place for many tourists to visit, this little sea still holds a certain scenic tranquility to it.

Maybe you have been able to visit the Sea of Galilee, maybe you've only seen pictures from friends or family members - or from one of Pastor Tuttle's trips. Regardless, it's interesting to have this place “come alive” as we see pictures of a place that seems so familiar because of how often we have read and heard about this region.

However, for a long time, this was not a place well known, or celebrated, or visited by tourists, but it was a place that sat in the shadows. Not only was the region of Galilee and cities like Capernaum on the wrong side of the tracks - or in this case the wrong side of the lake - but it was on the wrong side of history. This region

around the Sea of Galilee was on the way to the great sea, that is, the Mediterranean Sea, and therefore it was ground often trampled by foreign soldiers heading toward that crucial checkpoint. Battles were continually contested in this region, as it was a region that was often lost and regained, conquered and reconquered, over and over throughout history. In the book of Isaiah, it is referred to *as a region humbled, on the way to the sea*. The land once assigned to the tribes of Israel Zebulun and Naphtali in the days of Joshua had been repopulated by the Gentiles, a mixture of different nations residing in this place one given to the people of God. Its residents an ever-changing conglomeration of races as the population was often swept away and then filled up again by the tides of war. In Matthew's account, the region is referred to as land that sat *in the district and under the shadows of death*. And because it was on the north edge of this land it was a place far enough away from Jerusalem that there had also been this disconnect from the temple and from the God of Israel. If the people did believe in the LORD at all, there was this strange mixture of false religions and false gods that they served as well. The people of this region were often looked down upon and were considered half-breeds both physically and spiritually. In a place familiar with gloom and death, spiritual darkness and spiritual death were common staples as well.

And so it was, that when the time came for Jesus to set up his headquarters so that he could preach and teach the good news of the kingdom of heaven, he set up shop in this forgotten and forsaken region. Yes, there were certain advantages of operating next to the lake and near the crossroads of trade and travel, but the Savior comes in fulfillment of Isaiah's promise and in a lovely description of his heart of compassion. He came to bring light and life to those who sat in the darkness of death and unbelief. He came to bring hope to the hopeless and lift up those who were trampled by history and left downtrodden by sin and its curse. He came and the kingdom of heaven itself came near. It was like a brilliant sunrise had finally crested over those hills of Galilee and had poured out over this land leaving it sun-soaked with God's glory, and in a way, it is still basking in the brilliance of the Son of God.

Look at what Jesus would do in this region and you would understand while people still want to travel from around the world to see this little place. Around the Sea of Galilee Jesus would teach and preach with authority. He would heal the sick, feed thousands, reach out and touch the unclean to help and to heal. Compelled by love and compassion Jesus went out to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven. We are told that Jesus set up his home base of sorts in Capernaum. He chose several untrained ordinary men from this region to be his disciples, his initial ambassadors. Ordinary fishermen whom he would use to carry out this extraordinary task, they would be fishers of men. He would train them in this area, teach them, pray with them, eat with them. He would spend so much of his precious time with them on and around this lake and in this region of Galilee, preaching and teaching, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

Of all the places, why would he go there?! Why not a more populated and historically significant place like Jerusalem? Jesus went there because he cared! He came, the Son of God came near, just as the prophet foretold proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of heaven in this troubled region because He cared for those suffering under the weight of sin and death! He cares for people of all nations still today!

What wonderful comfort these words and actions of Jesus provide. Consider how he came and how he sought out the outcast. Think of how he remembered and came for the overlooked and forgotten. Look at how he reached out toward the unclean and did not recoil but in love, he came and touched their broken bodies and healed their souls. Praise the Lord for how he spent his precious time with those who may have seemed insignificant and forsaken. He loved them! He loves you too!

There are these thoughts that cross our minds when things are not going well in our lives. When death draws near, when we are trampled on by life's problems, when life is a grind and hope is hard to find, we may be tempted to think that we are forgotten. In this little corner of the world, in this stretch of land 2 hours away from the lights of the big city, in our little towns, in the solitude of our homes and our rooms, we might wonder if we are overlooked. Look in your mind's eye upon the shores of Galilee and see how Jesus remembers and visits and comes near those overlooked and forgotten. Look and your mind's eye and see him come near to those who needed his saving presence and remember that God cares! He cares about each and every one of us! Galilee was not a place filled with royalty or the celebrities of the day, the rich or the noble, this was a place very much filled with the forgotten and the ordinary. But Jesus came here because for Jesus each soul was precious. Jew or Gentile alike, no one would be forgotten, overlooked, or deemed too far gone. Jesus would go out and preach and teach in the region of Galilee, proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God has come near, and he would send out his disciples to the rest of the world!

By the grace of God, the light of the gospel has come to us as well. The light of Christ's gospel has stretched across the globe and broken the darkness of sin and death and despair. To us right here God has given us a living hope and life eternal in the person of Jesus Christ. His words have been shared with us. We have been brought close to him and we have been gathered into his church as the word of Christ has been cast out and has fallen over us and grabbed onto our hearts and brought us near to our God. And now our lives have forever been changed by the one who came to cleanse us by his holy precious blood. Through him, we are made new and worthy so that we might dwell in the blessed presence of God himself both now and forever.

What a day it must have been for Peter and Andrew, James and John when Jesus called them to follow him. They left behind their nets, their former way of life, and they followed Jesus. Ordinary guys, everyday people, with nothing special to draw

Jesus to them, but Jesus would come to them and call out to them and change their lives forever!

Day after day he does something similar for us as he continues to call out to us with that familiar message. ***Repent, the kingdom of heaven is near.*** Our lives as followers of Christ are those of daily repentance. The harsh light of God's Word makes it clear that we do not and cannot follow Jesus perfectly. The harsh light of the law exposes our many sins and how we have offended our holy God and yet the light of the gospel shines even brighter as God reveals how Jesus comes near with his saving message and proclaims the good news of the kingdom to us. Yes, even to us! He came to be your perfect substitute and my righteousness. He came to be our sacrifice and Savior, to rescue us from the gloom of sin and death. He would die and rise to give us eternal joy and undying hope!

Who are we that he should proclaim that good news to us?! Who are we that he would call us to follow him, and yet he does! And thus, our lives are forever changed. Compelled by his gracious call we leave behind our former ways and we follow him.

Along the way, like those imperfect disciples, we too will deny him, we will fail to heed his commands, we will forget his words, we will fall and stumble over ourselves in our selfish ways. God knows that this would be the case and yet still he chooses us. In his patience and love, he leads and guides so that we may follow. He calls us to follow where he leads, along the way He daily rebukes and forgives. He gently restores. He reminds us that we are his and we are loved and precious to him. He even gives us this noble station where he may use us to teach others about his grace, and bring others like our brothers and sisters, our children, and our friends and neighbors, closer to him. What grace God shows to us! What undeserved love he pours out upon common, everyday people! Even to those who may have been born on the wrong side of the tracks, or who have been forsaken or forgotten, trampled on or downtrodden, yet in grace and mercy and compassion he comes near to each of us with his good news of grace!

We deserved none of this! To be left to dwell and live in the shadows of gloom and death, to be left trying to scratch out some meaning in the everyday grind - that is what life ought to be for sinners like you and me. But instead, a brilliant light has dawned, our lives are forever brightened and changed for Christ has come for us. The kingdom of heaven comes near and in his great love he has cast his net over us and we are rescued from the depths and drawn near to our Savior so that we may live in the light of his presence both now and forever.

Give thanks. Praise your Lord. Follow Jesus. And proclaim the good news of his kingdom, because you are not forgotten, your Savior in his undeserved love comes near to you. Amen.