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Pursuing the Kingdom: The King Begins His Ministry

Matthew 4:12-25

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...As many of you know, before moving back to New England, Kathleen and I used to live in the Alleghany mountains of Virginia in the little town of Clifton Forge (which, coincidentally, is also Pastor Bruce's hometown). We lived in a few different places while serving our first church there and the last house we lived in before moving back was just outside of Clifton Forge on a farm surrounded by the Cowpasture River and surrounded, almost completely, with mountain views. And it wasn't until we went back to visit almost a year after we moved that we truly appreciated the beauty of it all.

People enjoy being in the mountains not only for the sense of adventure and exploration but, especially, for the breathtaking views that give a constant source of inspiration and wonder. But while looking at mountain peaks, we often don't study the valleys between them. That is, unless you take your time to hike through the trails in the valleys to observe everything on your way to each summit. Keep that in mind as we turn our attention towards today's scripture.

The verses we are looking at this week sit between two mountainous events, if you will, in the life of Jesus. His preparation for preaching the kingdom, like his baptism and temptations, and the Sermon on the Mount, his first kingdom message. Those two peaks are so glorious that we rarely look at, or give much thought to, the valley in between them. But this valley holds some beautiful basic truths that anyone who wants to give careful thought toward the kingdom must see. And if we take the time to observe the things that are going on in Matthew 4:12-25, we may just see the glorious light of the kingdom shining through.

This portion of scripture marks a decisive turning point in Matthew's Gospel narrative. The wilderness testing is over, the temptations of Satan have been overcome for now, as Luke's account informs us that Satan left to look for a more opportune time to strike again, and now the King steps onto the public stage. These verses function like a doorway between preparation and proclamation. What we see here is not merely the start of Jesus' ministry, but the unveiling of how the kingdom of heaven advances in a fallen world. Matthew wants us to see that the way Jesus begins His work tells us what kind of King He is and what kind of kingdom He brings. So, if you are able, please stand in honor of God's word as I read from the Gospel of Matthew beginning in 4:12-25. [Read Passage]

The passage opens with sobering news, John the Baptist has been arrested. John, the forerunner of Christ who confronted sin and prepared the way of the Lord, is now silenced by those in power. Now, we know the end of John's story and his death at the hands of King Herod Antipas but that actual event won't happen for a few more chapters in Matthew. But this moment reminds us that faithfulness does not guarantee our safety. John did everything God called him to do, yet he still ends up in prison which ultimately leads to his death. Matthew includes this detail to ground our expectations. The arrival of God's

kingdom does not immediately remove opposition; instead, it exposes it. Darkness resists the light.

When Jesus hears of John's arrest, He withdraws to Galilee. At first, this might sound like retreat or avoidance, but Matthew makes clear that this is not fear, it is fulfillment. Jesus is not reacting to events, He is moving according to divine purpose. He leaves Nazareth and settles in Capernaum, a fishing town along the Sea of Galilee, located in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali of ancient Israel. To Matthew's Jewish readers, these details matter deeply, because they connect directly to Isaiah's prophecy that light would dawn in a place long associated with darkness.

We need to understand that Galilee was not influential or distinguished in any way, at least not in any good way. It was a long ways away from Jerusalem, it was religiously mixed, and, culturally, the region was influenced by Gentiles. Many of the religious elite viewed this area as compromised and inferior. Yet Isaiah had foretold that this very region, once humiliated by invasion and idolatry, remember this region was part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the OT, would be the first to see God's saving light. Matthew wants us to understand something profound. God often begins His greatest works in places others have written off.

And this tells us something about God's grace. The kingdom of heaven does not advance from the top down, but by including the excluded. Jesus does not launch His ministry surrounded by scholars and leaders. He begins among fishermen, tradesmen, and everyday people living ordinary lives which we'll see in a moment. Light shines where darkness has lingered the longest. Brothers and sisters, that means no place is too broken, and no person is too far gone out of the loving reach of the King.

Matthew then quotes Isaiah: "The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light." Darkness, in Scripture, is more than ignorance. It is bondage, confusion, sin, and separation from God. And the light Jesus brings is not mere information, it is transformation. The light exposes, it heals, it guides, and it gives life. When Jesus steps onto the scene in Galilee, God's saving presence steps into human history in a new and decisive way.

And this also tells us something foundational about the kingdom of God itself. It does not begin where we would expect it to. The light of Christ shines first not in halls of power, but in places of darkness. This is good news for anyone who has ever felt overlooked, unqualified or far from God. The King goes where the darkness is thickest and into that darkness a light has dawned.

Matthew then summarizes Jesus' message with a sentence that should sound familiar to us at this point, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." This is the same message John preached, but now it carries even greater weight. The kingdom is not merely near because a prophet announced it. The kingdom is near because the King Himself has arrived. And again, repentance is not about changing our behavior, although it certainly is part of it, but first and foremost, it's about a radical change of allegiance. Jesus is announcing that God's reign has broken into history, and the only proper response is to turn from sin and turn toward him.

This announcement confronts every listener with a decision. If the kingdom has come near, then neutrality is impossible. [C.S. Lewis quote] You must either submit to the

King or resist Him. Repentance is not about earning entrance into the kingdom, it is about responding rightly to the King who brings it. To repent is to lay down our own selfish desires and acknowledge that Jesus alone has rightful authority over our lives. Jesus does not offer self-improvement. He offers a new kingdom.

Matthew then shifts from proclamation to demonstration. As Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee, He sees Simon Peter and Andrew casting their nets into the sea. This is an ordinary scene, men doing their daily work. Yet it becomes a holy moment because Jesus speaks. "Follow me," He says, "and I will make you fishers of men." And with those words, Jesus redefines their purpose, identity, and their future.

Notice the authority in Jesus' call. He does not ask them to consider his offer or to pray about it. Nor does he express the need for them to get themselves together first. He simply issues a command. And yet His command is also deeply gracious. "I will make you," He promises. The power to transform does not rest in the disciples' ability, but in Jesus' authority. Following Jesus begins not with competence, or having everything together, but simply with obedience.

And Matthew emphasizes their response. "Immediately they left their nets and followed Him." Notice what they leave behind. Their nets represent security, income, routine, and control. To leave them behind is to step into uncertainty. And this moment confronts our tendency to follow Jesus cautiously. We often want to obey without surrendering control, to have our cake and eat it too, but the King does not call for partial allegiance. He calls for complete and total trust. In the same way, following Jesus often requires releasing what once sustained us in order to receive what Christ will provide.

Jesus then, according to Matthew, next calls James and John, who were also fishermen and were mending their nets with their father. Once again, Matthew notes the immediacy of their response. And at the command of Jesus to follow him, they too leave their nets, but not only their nets and livelihood, like Peter and Andrew, but also their family. This does not mean Jesus devalues family, but it does mean He demands ultimate loyalty. The kingdom of heaven reshapes all relationships. When Christ calls, He should, and does, claim first place in our lives. What is it in your life that keeps you from following Jesus more fully? Whatever it is, we must give it over in complete surrender and seek after God who provides even more than we could ever imagine as he promise, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

We are then told that Jesus travels throughout all Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and affliction. Here we see the full shape of Jesus' ministry. Teaching explains the truth of the kingdom. Proclamation of the Gospel announces the urgency of response. Healing demonstrates the power and compassion of the King.

Jesus' miracles are not sideshows or marketing tools. They are signs of the kingdom breaking into a broken world. I want us to realize as we make our way through Matthew's gospel that every healing is a declaration that sin, sickness, and Satan do not have the final word. When Jesus heals, He is restoring what Adam and Eve's fall in the Garden has damaged. He is giving the world a glimpse of what life looks like under God's reign.

Not only that, his miracles serve as divine validation of his words, authority, and identity as the Son of God. These miracles confirm his message and testify to his role as

the promised Messiah. They act as signs pointing to God's power rather than just the acts themselves.

Matthew lists a wide range of afflictions: physical illness, neurological suffering, paralysis, and demonic oppression. This list is intentional. It shows that Jesus' authority is comprehensive. There is no form of brokenness beyond His reach, there is nothing outside of his power to heal. The King's power extends to the body, mind, and soul.

Think of it this way: When an artist works on restoring a ruined painting, they do not discard the damaged canvas. They carefully remove layers of grime, repair cracks, and reveal the original beauty beneath. Jesus' healings are acts of restoration. He does not abandon humanity, He restores it by removing the curse of sin.

As you might expect, as the news spreads, and crowds begin to gather from every direction. From Galilee to the Decapolis (which describes the 10 major cities in area east of the Jordan and surrounding the Sea of Galilee) and all the way down to Jerusalem and Judea and even beyond the Jordan. People travel long distances because they have heard about what is happening.

But Matthew subtly prepares us for a tension that will grow throughout his gospel. We will soon find out, and we know from our own experience, that great crowds are drawn to Jesus, but not all will follow Him as disciples. Many want healing without repentance, or the benefits of following Jesus without submission. However, truly following Jesus requires surrender. And the benefits of following Jesus are immediately tied to the cost of following, which involves letting go of control to experience true spiritual growth.

So, this passage leaves us all with a searching question. How will you respond to the King? Jesus still brings light into darkness. He still calls ordinary people. He still demands repentance. And He still offers restoration. The kingdom of heaven has come near and the only appropriate response is to turn, to follow, and to trust.

Matthew 4:12–25 shows us that the King begins His work not with force, but with faithfulness. Not in palaces, but in dark places. And not by recruiting the powerful, but by calling the willing. And that same King continues His work today, calling men and women out of darkness into His marvelous light. Let us pray and prepare our hearts for the Lord's table.