

Sunday's Sermon

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

250 Fox Hill Road ■ Hampton, Virginia 23669

January 22, 2023

The Reverend David E. Fox

Third Sunday after Epiphany (Year A) 2023

Matthew 4.12-23

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "When someone asks us where we want to be in our lives, the last thing that occurs to us is to look down at our feet and say, 'Here, I guess, since this is where I am.'"

I love this quote, because the place we need to be is here and now. We cannot wait for the more successful you and the more successful me. We cannot wait for the skinnier you, I know most of you, if not all of you, have already given up on your resolution of dropping weight. We cannot wait for the you with the degree, for you with the new job, for you with the family you've always dreamed of, for you being retired, for you to win the lottery. Here and now, need you as you are right now to bring about a change.

I bought a sign from an antique store in Plentywood, Montana, that read, "Bloom where you are planted." I would have it up in my office today, if I would not have left it at my last call. It hung just above my door, so that as I walked through the door it would remind me of this clever phrase. The sign caused me to think about and live into the fact that God has placed me here for a purpose – and the same is true for each of you. This image is a good reminder for me, especially with last week being my anniversary of being your pastor. We are exactly in the place that God is going to use us – here and now – in this location.

Our Gospel reading for today opens up with John being arrested. We all know what's in store for John. He's going to be killed – beheaded in fact, because the religious leaders and the empire have had enough of his radical thoughts and ideas about God.

Jesus has now left the town of Nazareth, where he was raised and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. There has to be a reason that Matthew went to such great detail in describing where Jesus was beginning to call home.

Karoline Lewis says that when we hear about these two places, Zebulun and Naphtali, it should causes us to grab an atlas. She goes on to say, "Yet, our map of Palestine at the time of Jesus will not be much help. No, we have to get our hands on a map from about 700 years before when these two Northern tribes were conquered by Assyria. In other words, Zebulun and Naphtali have not been on the lips of God's people for a very, very long timeⁱ."

Jesus has made himself a home in a small and insignificant place. William Carter says, "Jesus locates himself among the marginal, with the poor not the wealthy, with the rural peasants not the urban elite, with the ruled not the rulers, with the powerless...not the powerful, with those who resist imperial demands not enforce themⁱⁱ." Though the world may call Capernaum and the people insignificant, this place is central for God's plans.

Jesus is exactly in the place that God is going to use him – there and then – in that insignificant place – with those insignificant people, to bring about a disturbance in the empire, a revolution of salvation, an uprising of light. Jesus is where he is, because that is precisely where he needs to be, right where his feet are placed – where he has been planted.

Folks, I think many of you have dreams of being places other than where you are right now. You are hoping to win the lottery and take yourself out of this place. You have plans to be a better version of yourself – more organized, leaner, stronger, and have an endless amount of patients. You have mapped out where on God’s green earth you’d rather be that is other than this place that you work, learn, eat, sleep, and live. And maybe where you plan to be in your picture perfect future is a good goal and dream. But, did it ever occur to you that you need to look down at your feet and say, “This is where I need to be.”

Jesus decided to settle amongst a group of insignificant people in the middle of nowhere, that none had heard of. And, Jesus comes to this place to call each and every one of us to come and follow him, just as he did those fishermen who were doing their daily tasks that may have felt small and unimportant.

Jesus is calling us to follow him, and as I’ve said before and I’ll say it a thousand more times, from Bonhoeffer, “When Christ calls a [person] He bids them come and die.” This ties us back to Jesus’ first proclamation, after moving to Capernum, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Repentance is not a one and done thing, it is a way of life, it is a daily letting go of trying to control things and handing it over to God, that is the daily dying. We have to die to ourselves and our dreams of a better location than where we are currently planted, because Christ is calling us to this time and this place – here and now, to follow Him, to start a revolution that will bring about God’s Kingdom into this world.

Martin Luther once said, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” Sisters and brothers, we have been planted here and it’s time for us to embrace it and bloom. In what ways can we bloom in Hampton, people of Gloria Dei? At the top of my list would be to have life groups that meet here or in homes where you pray for one another, read scripture and learn from one another. Might God be calling you to bloom as a life group facilitator? Could it be that God has planted each one of you here, to bring about light in this darkened world through teaching, feeding, mentoring, playing, laughing, and listening to children who struggle with their daily tasks? Or maybe the Holy Spirit is working in and through you to shine the light in this darkened world in a new type of ministry that we’ve never thought of undertaking – just don’t suggest without being willing to lead. Are you listening for that word from the Holy Spirit? Will you adhere to what Christ is calling you to do? God has planted us here, are we willing to bloom? We are exactly in the place that God is going to use us – here and now – in this place.

2023 is going to be a year of exploring, developing, and living out our mission that Christ is calling us to live out – here and in this place. God has planted our feet right where he wants them, Christ is nourishing us with his Word and with his Body and Blood, the Holy Spirit is pouring out grace upon grace, it’s now time for us insignificant to the world people in this insignificant to the world place to bloom – to open up to the expansive possibilities in which God is calling us. Christ has come into our place of darkness and called us out to be the light that the world has been looking for. You are where you need to be. There is no mistake. It’s time to take root and bloom in this place – here and now.

ⁱ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=4796>

ⁱⁱ Carter, William. Matthew and the Margins. P.113-114.