

Sunday's Sermon

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

250 Fox Hill Road ■ Hampton, Virginia 23669

January 25, 2026

The Reverend David E. Fox

Third Sunday after Epiphany (Year A) 2026

Matthew 4:12-13

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

A vacuum—and I'm not talking about a household appliance—is defined scientifically as a space essentially devoid of matter, where the pressure is significantly lower than the surrounding atmosphere. The word itself is older than modern science; it comes from a simple idea: empty.

Much later, as the industrial sciences were developing, the term began to be used metaphorically. The fairly modern idiom “*to live in a vacuum*” emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and became especially common by the mid-twentieth century, particularly in social, political, and psychological writings.

To tell someone they are living in a vacuum is to say they are considering only their own thoughts and feelings, without regard for the wider world around them. So, to urge someone not to live in a vacuum is to acknowledge a deeper truth: no person, no idea, and no action exists independently of social, cultural, economic, or historical forces.

And yet, we live in a world filled with people acting as though their lives exist in isolation—as though everyone else is merely an obstacle or a disposable inconvenience.

Sisters and brothers, my message for you today is this: we must resist the temptation to become insular. Because when we turn inward, when we close ourselves off from the realities of the world God loves, we risk living inside a vacuum of our own making.

When Jesus begins his public ministry, Matthew is very deliberate in telling us where he goes. Though one might anticipate the Jewish Jesus to make his home in Jerusalem, Jesus leaves Nazareth and makes his home in Capernaum, by the sea—a working town, a border town, a place shaped by trade routes, Roman occupation, economic pressure, and cultural tension. Therefore, Jesus does not live or minister in a vacuum.

If Jesus were looking for isolation, for safety, for a controlled and comfortable spiritual environment, Capernaum would have been the wrong choice. Yet Matthew tells us that it is precisely there, of all places, that Jesus begins to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

The light does not dawn in a vacuum. It shines in real places, among real people, carrying real burdens. Jesus does not wait for an ideal setting; he steps directly into the complexity of the world as it is. And it is from that place—from that contested, ordinary, crowded shoreline—that God’s kingdom comes near.

About ten years ago, the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA at the time, Elizabeth Eaton, addressed a gathering of the church and said, “*We’re not a social service agency with sacraments. We are the Body of Christ, and together, we are church for the sake of the world.*”

When Bishop Eaton says the church is not a social service agency with sacraments, she isn’t telling us to care less. She is reminding us who we are. We serve because we are the Body of Christ. We love because Christ first loved us and continues to love the world through us. And we exist—not for ourselves—but for the sake of the world, the very world that God refuses to abandon.

Gloria Dei’s calling, then, isn’t just to meet needs—but to be Christ’s presence in the midst of those needs. Here at Gloria Dei, our mission of *Building Faith, Building Community, and Building Lives* flows directly out of this identity. We build faith not in a vacuum, but through Word and Sacrament. We build community not by going it alone, but by walking beside our neighbors. And we build lives not merely by addressing needs, but by sharing the life of Jesus with those around us—in Hampton and beyond.

The church lives most fully when it refuses the vacuum—when it roots itself in real places, with real people, carrying real wounds. Wherever the church gathers around Word and Sacrament and then steps into the life of the community with humility and love, Christ is served. Not because we are heroes—but because we are Christ’s Body.

We’re now in our fourth year of holding Bible study at the HELP Day Center on Buckroe Avenue. And while it hasn’t been easy—while trust has come slowly and sometimes painfully—we are finally beginning to see real headway. Our conversations are going deeper. Stories are being shared more freely. And, quite possibly, there are some there who look forward to seeing us each week.

When we step into that space with curiosity rather than assumptions, with humility rather than answers, something holy happens. We discover that Christ is already there—speaking, teaching, and revealing himself in ways we did not anticipate. Christ gathers all of us together around his Word.

That’s what it looks like for the church to refuse the vacuum. We don’t show up as experts or saviors. We show up as the Body of Christ—listening, learning, and being transformed alongside our neighbors. And in that shared space, faith is being built, community is being formed, and lives—ours included—are being shaped by grace.

Sisters and brothers, Jesus did not wait for the world to be ready. He went to Capernaum. He stepped into a real place, among real people, carrying real burdens—and there he proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven had come near.

After gathering around God's Word, and sharing the foretaste of the feast to come at Christ's table, Christ sends us—not into a vacuum, but into the real places of our lives. Into our neighborhoods and workplaces. Into conversations we don't control. Into communities shaped by joy and by pain.

We don't go as experts. We don't go as saviors. We go as the Body of Christ.

Sometimes that looks like a Bible study on Buckroe Avenue. Sometimes it looks like listening more than speaking. Sometimes it looks like showing up again and again, trusting that God is already at work long before we arrive.

The light does not shine in a vacuum. It shines where people live. And by God's grace, that same light shines through ordinary people like us—slowly, quietly, faithfully— all for the sake of the world. Thanks be to God.