

“It’s Happening”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

(© 2020 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)

Repentance in the Bible is more often about believers than unbelievers.

Matthew 4:12-25

January 10, 2021

(Available in print form at corinthtoday.org/sermons or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

Gathering power

If we stretch 2020 into 2021, it’s been a year of paradox in terms of gathering. Over and over we have been told of the dangers of mass gathering due to the pandemic, and, indeed, the usual ways in which Americans gather – from parades to sporting events to church services – have been severely limited. At the same time, we’ve seen some of the most memorable gatherings in recent memory – rallies and protests, some turning destructive – including this week.

Gatherings of people always have power – power to define or destroy a movement, power to initiate change or a backlash. Human beings are hard wired for an adrenaline surge in a large group. Crowds attract some and repel others, but you can’t ignore them. A gathering means something’s happening that you can’t ignore.

Matthew 4 portrays Jesus’ early ministry as a series of mass gatherings. We also know that an angry mob turned on him on Good Friday. The collection of humanity in one location doesn’t of itself validate a movement. But it feels like it in the moment.

I described Matthew 1-2 a couple of weeks ago with a puzzle analogy. The first step is to get all the side and corner pieces separated and connected to frame the picture. The next step is sort the pieces by color or theme or patterns.

That’s how I see Matthew 4. Matthew is grouping the puzzle pieces that will become a clear picture later. The themes of these verses will be played out in the rest of his gospel. Let’s look at them together.

Light is shining

If something's happening, what is it? In verses 12-17, light is shining.

Matthew begins this section, "When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee." This is the first of twelve geographical features in these verses. Matthew thinks places are important to Jesus' story.

When we last left John the Baptist, he was preaching and baptizing. The first part of Matthew 4 records Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. As God breaks through to a new day, Jesus is tested forty days in the Judean desert as the children of Israel were tested forty years. He doesn't fail the test.

What Pastor Amy last week called John's "in between" ministry of breaking the silence and preparing the way had drawn mostly from Judea in the south. Matthew will explain later in his gospel who imprisoned John and why, but that's not where he wants your attention at this point. He simply wants you to know there's a connection. "Withdrew" probably means he withdrew from danger. It wasn't time to die yet.

So while there's continuity with John the Baptist, the change of location is critical to Jesus' mission. He had "lived in a town called Nazareth" (2:23) which was small and inconsequential, but now he moved to Capernaum, a regional hub of politics and commerce overlooking the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Distance-wise, it's Hickory to Statesville, but it's more like moving from Longview to Charlotte.

Matthew says this fulfills what Isaiah said because this was the territory of two northern tribes that are named in Isaiah's prophecy: Nazareth was in Zebulun and Capernaum was in Naphtali.

Running right through Capernaum and close to Nazareth was their version of I-40, called "The Way of the Sea." And that was the problem. Connecting to Statesville is not so bad, but I-40 will take you to all sorts of ungodly places. The Way of the Sea connected Egypt to Syria, and then to other major ancient cultures. Isaiah had therefore called this area "Galilee of the Gentiles." Galilee was fertile for crops, but also fertile for trade and new ideas – much more so than Judea.

People thoroughly steeped in the Jewish religion of Jesus' day would have said, "Galilee is a dark place." That's the point. There were Gentiles all around Galilee and some even in it. If a Jewish young man wandered off, he could worship in pagan shrines in a half-day journey. A Jewish girl could run off and find herself a Gentile boyfriend or husband in a heartbeat. In Jewish thinking, Galilee was definitely an underdog for the appearance of Messiah or anything else good.

Jesus went there on purpose. To bring "a great light" to "the people living in darkness." No wonder crowds begin to gather. Light is shining.

It wasn't a big surprise that John the Baptist had said, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." He was in Judea. Of course the kingdom of heaven is close. Now Jesus preaches the exact same sermon in Galilee *of the Gentiles*.

Fish are teeming

The second way Matthew describes that "It's happening" is that fish are teeming (18-22). It's time to haul in the nets.

Jesus calls four men along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, probably along the northwest shore near Capernaum. It's no accident that Matthew points out their vocation. Successful fishermen need courage, perseverance, and cunning. You can catch fish if you're rich or poor, male or female, young or old, but you better not be impatient or uncommitted. There will be disappointing days and dangerous nights, but if you stick with it before long your nets will be so full they'll start to break.

Jesus is calling them to an analogous ministry: to "fish for people." I'm surprised and a bit disappointed when Christians suggest that we need to flee from people who don't believe or do the wrong thing. Jesus' call is to cast our nets into the abyss and rescue them.

It matters to Matthew that the first four disciples he mentions are two pairs of brothers, and that one pair of brothers left their father behind. Remember that gathering crowds can both unite and divide people. We're not told what Zebedee thought of his sons forsaking the family business on short notice, because he's not the point. The point is that now is the time to fish. Fishing is seasonal; it's situational. Fish don't school or bite just because you're in the mood. If you're not willing to drop everything and fish when the fish are biting, you're not going to catch many fish.

News is spreading

The third reason it's happening is that news is spreading (23-25). In this paragraph, Matthew focuses even more on geography, but not only on geography. He tells you what Jesus is doing.

In Galilee he's teaching in their synagogues. Synagogues were gathering places for Jews for whom Jerusalem and Judea was too far to travel on a weekly basis. Jews had been scattered against their will from the time of the Assyrians 750 years earlier, but some had also relocated voluntarily. Judea didn't need synagogues, but they were all over Galilee.

Josephus, first century historian who was at one-point governor of Galilee, said there were 200 towns in Galilee with 15,000 people – giving the area a population of 3 million. Josephus was prone to exaggeration, but this was a densely populated area. The synagogue was often the largest Jewish building, prominent on the skyline. It was

the town center, the social hall, and the place for instruction in the law. Jesus taught and preached all through the areas “the good news of the kingdom.” I know you want more details than that, but you have to wait until later in Matthew’s gospel.

Jesus’ ministry was apparently confined to Galilee, but word of what he said and especially what he did spread north to Syria. Syria is probably important to Matthew because many scholars believe he is writing from and for Antioch in Syria. Their ears would perk up knowing that Jesus had reached them. He was also busy healing diseases and torments of all kinds. He changed the lives of demoniacs, paralytics, and lunatics. Are you surprised that news was spreading?

The last verse says Jesus’ reputation spread east to the Decapolis and “the region across the Jordan” and south to Judea and Jerusalem. It wasn’t possible to go very far west, or you’d wind up in the Great (Mediterranean) Sea. But every direction the news could travel, it did. Like Syria, the Decapolis (ten Greco-Roman towns) and the east bank of the Jordan were thoroughly Gentile. Talk about “the people walking in darkness”! Judea and Jerusalem are where John preached, and Jesus won’t ignore them while he expands to other places and, more importantly, to other people.

So there you have it: It’s happening. It’s a movement. Light is shining. Fish are biting. News is spreading. These are the groups of puzzle pieces Matthew is sorting. All through his gospel Matthew will develop these themes. Right now he just wants you intrigued. No matter what you thought of any mass gathering over the last few months, you wanted to know more about it, didn’t you? Matthew intends to pique your curiosity about this Jesus he has introduced to you. It’s happening, and it’s exciting.

What should we do?

Matthew also wants you to respond. Each of these three segments of our reading today explicitly or implicitly states what we should do because *this* is happening.

Repent. Both John and Jesus issue this call at the beginning of their ministry. We find this word in one of the oldest stories in the Bible, Job, and in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, and many places in between. More often than not, it’s addressed to religious people in the Bible. We often think repentance is for unbelievers, and it is. But it’s also for believers. It means to change your mind, and, as a result, change your behavior. The word calls on every person to own that they’re not ready for God’s rule.

When “it’s happening,” and God is doing something new, you’re not going to get in on it without a shift of attitude and behavior. Of what should you repent? Matthew will unfold that, but at this point he is only asking of his readers what Jesus was asking of his listeners: Are you still “in” this movement if Jesus asks you to abandon the systems of this world and join his kingdom in his way? You can’t wait for the details. “Well, let me check what you’re asking me to change and then I’ll decide if I join what Jesus is

doing.” It doesn’t work that way. It’s not about what he is going to ask, it’s about who he is. He’s the King who’s brought the kingdom near. Repent!

Follow. If you want a visual, it comes in the second paragraph. Drop what you’re doing, now, and fall in behind. Literally: “Here! After me.”

I know you want to know what I want to know. Does it mean I quit my job and abandon my family? Once again, you’re getting ahead of Matthew. The answer is “maybe” – it certainly means this for some. It’s going to get radical in the next three chapters, but the issue now is this: “Who or what is more important to you than following Jesus?” What you cling to is your idol, and you don’t have any ultimate hold on any thing or person in this life.

My ideas of what church looks like have been stripped away from me this year after working on a certain model for three decades before that. Linda and I have never lived around our families of origin, and now our children have all moved away. Some of you have literally lost your family or health or economic security. The Bible’s first faith lesson, related in the story of Job and illustrated here, is that following the Lord may well cost you everything and everyone else. Hold on and keep following.

Bring. There was a very human element to what was happening in Matthew 4. To be sure, there was a supernatural element – the purposes of God, the preaching of Jesus, and the power of his miracles, but Matthew tells us that people spread the news and people brought the sick. What happens when God is doing something and his people don’t collaborate?

I’m convinced God is going to do something radically different in the church post-Covid. I don’t know what it will look like, but your church staff and leaders will be wrestling through it in the first few months of the year. We can’t start with “This is what we were doing before – how can we quickly move back to it?” There will certainly be continuity with what God has done – there always is. But what happens going forward may very well look different than what we’ve seen in the past. Is that OK?

Of course it’s OK. And maybe it’s supposed to start now. Who’s been on your heart that you’ve been waiting to invite to church or to Jesus until Covid is over? Why? Now’s the time to check in, checkup, check out what’s happening in their world and in their hearts. People were coming to Jesus because someone brought them. Whom will you bring? And what’s the next step?

Repent. Follow. Bring. That’s what you do when it’s happening. Amen.