***AND SO IT BEGINS!***

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Text: Matthew 4:12-25

Who says that God doesn’t have a sense of humor? Jack Sadler, the pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Richmond and Tom Cutting, my colleague at Grace Covenant, were friends who were fairly competitive with one another. Each posted his sermon title in the church section of the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. One Sunday Tom and Jack were preaching from the same Psalm text, and it made Tom’s day to open the Saturday paper to the church section and find Jack’s sermon title, “A Song to Sing,” just above Tom’s sermon title, “A Better Song to Sing.” At least the paper got the sermon titles right. Our Scottish friend Jim Simpson tells of a Dr. Smith who was distressed to learn that the title of his sermon had been erroneously listed in the newspaper; instead of “Why I Believe in Immortality”, the title of his sermon was listed as “Why I believe in Immorality”.[[1]](#endnote-1) I wonder how big the crowd was that Sunday! All of which is prelude to my sermon title this morning, “AND SO IT BEGINS!” I chose that title last year after looking at the text for this day without thought to the events of this weekend. I chose it because the text describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, yet falling as it does on this inaugural weekend in our nation, it might be a different *beginning* that is on many minds as it was for then President-elect Trump who tweeted out at 4:30 a.m. on Friday, “It all begins today.” AND SO IT BEGINS! How ironic, and God gets the last laugh!

The juxtaposition of those beginnings, Jesus’ ministry and a presidency, struck me as I watched the inauguration ceremonies on Friday. Our presidential beginnings are marked with military bands, throngs of thousands, vestiges of power, and a lot of pomp and circumstance. It was the kind of beginning that many Jews hoped would one day mark Jesus’ beginning as the king of Israel. They were looking for a messiah who would be a political leader – someone who would kick out the Romans and reestablish the throne of David in Israel. On more than one occasion they tried to make Jesus king. But that was not Jesus’ calling, nor his beginning.

There is a long silence in Scripture between Jesus’ birth and the beginning of his ministry in Galilee; there is a brief reference to his appearance in the temple at age 12, but we know virtually nothing of the rest of those first thirty years of his life – nothing of his family and friends, nothing of his education, nothing of his teenage crushes or professional pursuits, nothing of his growing up into the man who waded into the Jordan with his cousin John to be baptized. According to Matthew, that is when it all began – after his baptism with water and the Spirit, after the temptations in the wilderness which he successfully resisted, after John had been arrested – then the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth began, not in his hometown of Nazareth, but in Galilee where he made his home in the town of Capernaum. No brass bands greeted him there. No crowds marked the onset of his career. None of those who would put him to death even took notice of him as he began to preach and teach and heal.

Those who had been awaiting the coming of the messiah certainly expected something more when he came, something akin to the words shouted by Gladys Herdman as the angel of the Lord at her first rehearsal in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*: “Shazam! Out of the black night with horrible vengeance, the Mighty Marvo-…”[[2]](#endnote-2) That is what many expected of the messiah, a shazam moment in which God would enter human history and set things right with an army of angels in tow. There are those who are waiting for that kind of an entrance even now – God’s appearance in a shazam moment to make things the way they ought to be. But that is not God’s way; the messiah of God came with much less fanfare to a stable in Bethlehem and began his ministry in Galilee in the same humble way. He is not a shazam kind of messiah. He is the kind of messiah who rides into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, not on a white stallion. He is the messiah who says, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” He is the messiah whose advance press agent is a wilderness prophet dressed in camel’s hair shouting, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He is the messiah whose hand-picked disciples include a handful of fishermen, a tax collector, and some poor women including prostitutes. He is the messiah whose message is not a call to arms but a call to repent.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a prison cell, suggests that repentance is “not in the first place thinking about one’s own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Jesus’ way is not a self-centered, selfish, self-serving, or self-righteous way. Jesus’ way is self-giving, self-sacrificing, self-denying. It is a humble, righteous, obedient way that begins with repentance. It is that way Jesus came to show us, that way Jesus came to teach us, that way to which Jesus calls us, because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Jesus’ ministry begins, not by rallying the troops or inciting the crowds, but by urging repentance.

That is where it begins for us – with repentance. If we are to follow in the sandals of Peter and Andrew, James and John, as disciples of Jesus then we begin by repenting of our self-centered ways and embracing Jesus’ self-giving way. We begin by looking beyond ourselves to the needs of others. We begin by acknowledging that we are in need of guidance for our lives, comfort for our souls, and salvation from our sin.

In 1753 the New Providence Presbyterian Church in Raphine called John Brown to serve as pastor. Life on the frontier was hard, lonely and often insecure in those days, and the urgency people felt to have spiritual help in facing those challenges was reflected in the call to their new pastor:

*WORTHY AND DEAR SIR: We being for these many years passed in very destitute circumstances, in want of the ordinances of the Gospel among us, many of us under distressing spiritual languishment, and multitudes perishing in our sins for want of the bread of life broken among us, our Sabbaths wasted in melancholy silence at home, or sadly broken and profaned by the more thoughtless among us…we do, worthy and dear Sir, from our hearts, and with the most cordial affection and unanimity, agree to call, invite, and request you to take the ministerial care of us: and we do promise that we will receive the Word of God from your mouth, attend on your ministry, instructions, and reproofs, in public and private, and submit to the discipline which Christ has appointed in his Church, administered by you…[[4]](#endnote-4)*

Now that is not exactly the call that I received when I came here. My call was not quite so elegantly and desperately stated; none expressed themselves “under distressing spiritual languishment.” But can you hear the yearning on the part of those frontier people for a change in their lives, a break from their old way of living to a new way in Christ, a way that they could not find on their own? While it is cast as a call to a pastor, it is perhaps equally a corporate act of repentance by people longing for a new and better way ahead in a harsh and hazardous land.

Many of those to whom Jesus spoke did not feel that same sense of longing for a new path for their lives. They were content where they were, and perhaps you are too. But in Jesus’ call to repentance, in his invitation to discipleship, in his preaching of the Gospel, in his healing of the sick, and in his very presence, they found a new way to follow, a way marked by love and hope and the power and promises of God. The signs of that divine power were in Jesus’ healings; in the miracles he performed the people saw the power of God at work in a way that exceeded what anyone else could do. For some the miracles were just a good show. But for many, the proof of God’s healing power in Jesus made them willing and even anxious to hear the good news of God’s promises from the mouth of the divine healer.

And so it begins, this ministry of Jesus; it begins with a call to repent and an invitation to follow him, and good news to believe about the coming Kingdom of God. It begins without a hint of crucifixion and resurrection – that will come later. It begins with where the people are and the changes they need to make to be where they need to be. And so it begins for us and for all disciples of Jesus – begins with a break from our past and a commitment to Jesus’ way into the future. It begins anew each week as we gather here to repent of our sins and hear God’s Good News and respond by offering ourselves in faithful discipleship. We repeat that pattern in worship each week – repent, listen, commit to follow – because each week is a fresh start on that path of discipleship, another step on the way of Jesus. When then will it begin with you? Perhaps today! Amen

1. Rev. James A. Simpson, *Holy Wit*, Gordon Wright Publishing:Edinburgh, 1986, p.13 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, HarperTrophy: 1972, pp.62-63 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James C. Howell, *The Beauty of the Word*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 2011, p.40 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Katharine L. Brown, *New Providence Church 1746-1996: A History*, Raphine, VA: New Providence Presbyterian Church, 1996, pp.,41-42 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)