

San Lorenzo Community Church

United Church of Christ

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, January 22, 2017

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of Matthew 4:12-23

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John was put in prison, He left for Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth, He came and lived in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ that what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying:

¹⁵ "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles:

¹⁶ The people who sat in darkness
saw great light.

And on those who sat in the land of the shadow of death,
light has dawned."

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

¹⁸ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, throwing a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ They immediately left their nets and followed Him.

²¹ And going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in a boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and He called them. ²² They immediately left the boat and their father and followed Him.

²³ Jesus went throughout all Galilee teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all sorts of diseases among the people.

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.

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New Yorkers are taught to expect the unexpected when you sit down in a taxi. In fact, they've built a whole TV show on this very premise. It's called "Taxicab Confessions." People share their deepest, darkest secrets with a cab driver they *hope* they'll never see again. You don't know what's going to unfold when you step inside. You just need to be ready.

On November 9th, the day after the presidential election, Stephanie sat down in a cab and she looked shell shocked ... like nearly every American, however they voted. The driver Mauricio asked how she was doing and, at first, she was silent, staring off into space, as if she couldn't even find the words. And then the flood gates opened and she couldn't stop.

She said, "I'm scared at the forces of hatred America has now unleashed. I am sad, as a black woman, to see Obama's legacy so gleefully reversed. And I am disappointed at just how deep the fault lines separating us run."

Mauricio listened. He nodded, like a good confessor. And then, he peered in that rearview mirror and gave her a good old fashioned talking to, the kind your grandma gave when she caught you moping around her kitchen.

Mauricio said, "I've seen a lot of people today and they're all sad. People in my cab are sad. People in my neighborhood are sad. Yes, we're immigrants. Yes, we're poor. But here's what I told them and I'm telling you: 'I am not afraid. You can't be afraid either.'"

Mauricio's words sounded lovely and hopeful and completely divorced from reality, but he just kept going. "I'm not worried," he said, "because if the day comes when a president tries to hurt us, really hurt people, there's gonna be somebody in that Congress who believes in God. They might be a Republican or a Democrat, I don't know. But that person will say, 'No, Mr. President, you cannot do this. Because I believe in God and God lives in these people, and you cannot hurt them.' And other people who believe in God will speak up, too. I am not afraid, because somebody in there follows Jesus."

Well, here we are, the Sunday after the inauguration of Donald Trump as the president of the United States of America. And I hear the voice of Mauricio. I hear the voices of my grandmothers. And as I read the gospel of Matthew, I see and feel and hear God incarnate calling people to repent and turn toward the kingdom of justice and hope and mutuality and love for the other. I see and feel and hear Jesus beckoning us to follow him. And I am not afraid. No, I feel ready--ready to follow like I never have before. And thanks be to God, I know I'm not the only one.

On my drive to the church a few days ago, I was tuned into the radio and on came the amazing Shirley Bassey, an amazing voice of jazz, blues and American Standards songbook. And, after the music played the introduction I heard Ms. Bassey sing these words:

There may be trouble head
But while there's music and moonlight and love and romance.
Let's face the music and dance.

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And I thought, yes, there's a theme song for you. It's a theme song of discipleship. It's a theme song of empowerment. It's a theme song of living and thriving in this new era of fear and uncertainty.

Before the fiddlers have fled,
Before they ask us to pay the bill, and while we still have that chance
Let's face the music and dance.

In many churches across the country, we have settled into a rhythm these past eight years when we thought the work of the church and the work of the government were moving in the same direction. Not in perfect harmony. Not without differences and failures. But, still, we were opening rights of the oppressed, we were addressing the needs of education and poverty, we were talking about racism and sexism and homophobia in increasingly constructive ways, we were making health care affordable and accessible to all, we were finding solutions to welcome immigrants and restore an economy that was in the worst condition since the depression. Jobs have been restored – not enough, not at the levels of previous decades, but the unemployment dropped by more than 50% in the last eight years. It was something and it was all moving in the direction of liberation, wholeness, dignity.

And now, all of these efforts seem to be in jeopardy on so many levels. Already the government has removed the website page for resources for the LGBTQ community. It has already removed the website page for resources about Climate Change. Yes, indeed, as Ms. Bassey sang in a most understated way, "There may be trouble ahead."

And then I remember, God is bigger than that. God is bigger than the trouble ahead. Just ask the Israelites, and you'll hear about a God who liberates people from every kind of slavery. A God who touches the mouths of prophets with burning coal and gives them a word and a truth they could not have manufactured on their own. Oh, yes, God is bigger.

Just look at Jesus, the clear and true embodiment of God with us. Would so many people have flipped their lives inside out, literally dropped their nets, for a really good teacher, an entertaining speaker? Would the religious and political authorities have been so dead set on shutting this man down, if he was merely a good organizer or one more wannabe messiah?

No, Jesus walked up and down Galilee, and everything about him radiated the fullness of God. He was the real deal, and when he announced the kingdom was near, people believed it because it was unfolding around him with every step he took. Simon Peter saw it, sensed it. His brother Andrew did, too. When this Jesus turned toward them and said, "Follow me," they simply replied, "Alright. We're with you."

He walked and walked, teaching like one with wisdom in the synagogue and proclaiming good news on the streets. He touched people and brought them to wholeness. With every step, every move, the kingdom unfolded in Jesus' presence.

Do you remember Michael Jackson's video for "Billy Jean"? He's stepping down the street, and everywhere his foot lands, that block of pavement lights up. Now I'm not drawing any conclusions between Michael Jackson and Jesus. Don't get worried. I'm just saying that image works for me.

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Wherever Jesus stepped, there was the light and power of God. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in real space and time: the people sitting in darkness looked up when Jesus drew near, and they couldn't deny the God-power shining out of him. "Now that's light," they said. So much light that even death on the cross couldn't extinguish it. That much light.

Wealthy women and uneducated men followed it. Lonely children and abandoned elders followed it. Centurions and Samaritans, tax collectors and holy people followed it. Countless generations of every nation, race and tongue have followed it.

And when they did, something happened. Folk stepped into Jesus' footsteps, were literally baptized into his life, death and resurrection, and they became powerful, just like him. They became salt and light in the world, just like him. They rose up in the face of death, just like him. As long as they stayed hooked up with that source, as long as they kept walking the streets and studying his word and falling in love with God and sharing his bread and cup and healing all that is broken and proclaiming God's dream for this world--as long as they followed Jesus' Way, fear didn't stand a chance.

If we ever needed this light and power--the light and power of Jesus before--we sure do need it now. You must have heard the yearning among our friends and neighbors and perfect strangers. People who have nothing to do with church are turning this way and that, seeking at last a truth that cannot be spun and a light that cannot be quenched.

Even this passage from Matthew, the story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, begins when Jesus preaches his first sermon – an act he undertakes upon hearing of the arrest and imprisonment of John the Baptist. At this injustice, Jesus begins to walk across the land and he picks up where John left off – “turn around, people, turn around, change your life, the whole new world of God is coming.”

These are shoes we walk in. As Mauricio said: “I am not afraid. You can't be afraid either.” Remember who and whose you are. Because God is bigger than this. And, dear brothers and sisters, all of us followers of Jesus were made for moments like this.

Fear looms like that thief in the night; we answer with resurrection hope. Selfish lies threaten the fabric of our democracy; we speak truth until our voices are hoarse. Hate and division push people into terrified corners; we link arms and walk the loving, liberating, life-giving way Jesus showed us, humble but not humiliated, healing but not dominating, smarter than any serpent but never as cruel. We do not stop. As the song says:

There may be teardrops to shed
But while there's music and moonlight and love and romance
Let's face the music and dance

It's our time to stand up and say "No, you cannot hurt the beloved children of God. And we are all beloved children of God." It's our time to march and it's time to dance. It's our time to face the music and do what we have been called to do and be who we have been called to be. And when they ask who sent you, when they ask who you follow, you say the name above all other names. You tell them: Jesus. For this is the Way of transformation, love and peace. Amen.