

Jesus' Neighbors

Isaiah 9: 1-4

Matthew 4: 12-23

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Isaiah 9: 1-4

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Matthew 4: 12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Excitement and curiosity, hesitancy and mystery, eagerness and wonder, mixed emotions and uncertainty—these are all packed alongside the many moving boxes stacked in like a Tetris game in the moving van. With so many memories now behind, there are many miles yet ahead. There is so much now waiting to be discovered, to be done, when the truck is emptied and the

new address becomes home. The old and familiar will be replaced for a time by the unknown and the unfamiliar. New neighbors and a new neighborhood await.

Whether it is for work or family reasons, because of marriage or divorce, for more room or to downsize, for retirement or because of a changing neighborhood, the average American will have this moving experience 11 times in their life.

Each move—whether it is done with reluctance or with enthusiasm—closes one life chapter and opens another. The confusion of a new community and new neighbors can be both exhilarating and intimidating. Moving provides us a new start, a nearly blank slate that can allow us to change how others perceive us and also how we perceive ourselves. Moving also can cause us to question virtually every aspect of ourselves as we might wonder, “Who am I now?”

Jesus was a boy, a man, on the move—from a stable in Bethlehem to an unknown yet safe space in Egypt, and then to his childhood home in Nazareth. It was this boyhood home that Jesus left when he heard that John the Baptist—the one who prepared the way for Jesus—had been arrested. Jesus left home to begin his ministry, his work, to step onto the path, the new life chapter, his cousin had prepared, God had prepared, as he withdrew to Capernaum. Emotionally pained by John’s fate, Jesus withdrew to the land that was itself a place of pain, of oppression, of death, to territories of burden, to the darkness of Zebulun and Naphtali. Into the darkness of the region Jesus began his ministry as the light he was born to shine. Jesus moved, and Jesus was moved.

Each of the gospels tell of Jesus being rejected as a prophet, as a teacher, as a wise and able healer, in his hometown. The neighbors of his youth could only see the son, the oldest child, of Mary and the carpenter Joseph. He was unwelcome, rejected, as anything else in his hometown, now and in the near future when he tried to return, to go home again. He must move on.

Pushed out of his comfort zone, Jesus moved on to the land of Zebulun, to the land of Naphtali, to Capernaum, to join and break into the darkness of his new neighbors, the outcasts, the marginalized and the less fortunate. With sympathetic concern, with compassion, for the people around him, Jesus immediately called them to repent, to turn away from the ways, the actions, that were in their control to hold them, to keep them, in the dark. He invited them to come see that with divine love, hope and grace the kingdom of heaven had come near.

From the beginning his ministry was not to be a solo act, and he asked four fishermen—Peter, Andrew, James and John—to join him in making fishers of men, fishers of humanity, to further God’s message, and all four immediately did join him. Throughout his earthly ministry he continued to seek out his neighbors who society had deemed unworthy and powerless, to empower them and others with the love and grace of the good news. Jesus moved where God led—not just to a particular location but to particular neighbors—to people who walked in darkness, to those in need of hope, to those seeking forgiveness, to those who were poor and hungry, to those asking for healing. He knew that if you are going to catch fish, you have to go to where the fish are swimming.

From Capernaum Jesus will move on to other villages and cities, he will move on to many new neighbors and some new disciples. He will be moved by who and by what he sees.

Jesus is always on the move, and so to follow Jesus we too are to always be on the move. Following Jesus is never static, never stationary, never status quo. Following Jesus can move us with excitement and curiosity, hesitancy and mystery, eagerness and wonder, compassion and concern.

Just as Jesus moved throughout his ministry to meet the needs of people, the needs of his neighbors, around him as God called him to do, we too are called to move around in ministry, to move around within and outside our walls, and beyond our comfort zone to meet the needs of our neighbors.

As Jesus made his home in Capernaum by the sea, he walked around the town and met his neighbors. He had compassion for what he saw - he saw people hurting, he saw people sick, he saw people overlooked.

As Jesus made his home anywhere throughout Galilee, Bethany, Samaria, Caesarea Philippi, Ephraim, Perea, Jericho, and Jerusalem, Jesus passionately and compassionately cared for his neighbors as he taught, fed, healed and forgave them from the ways they walked in darkness as he was continually moved by their pain, their need, their hunger.

Jesus makes his home anywhere his neighbors are hurting, needy and hungry.

Jesus is with grieving Ukrainian citizens mourning the loss of loved ones as missile strikes destroyed their communities, their lives, since the invasion began nearly one year ago.

Jesus is with the poor in Peru who live in bitter, harsh conditions because of a high degree of government corruption.

Jesus waits with refugees gathered along the US-Mexican border seeking a better life as wise and humane immigration policies wait to be created.

Jesus is with his unhoused neighbors in a Manchester encampment, huddled under blankets in a tent, knowing a better solution must be found.

Jesus is anywhere, everywhere, his neighbors are, and we are called to be as well. The second greatest commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself," moves us to the great responsibility to, as Gerard Majella said, "see in my neighbor the Person of Jesus Christ."

With hearts of compassion, with eyes to bear witness to their pain, with ears to hear even what they cannot speak, with hands to reach out to theirs, with feet to walk alongside them, God calls the church, we who have accepted Jesus' invitation to follow him, to make our home anywhere our neighbors are hurting, needy and hungry, that we may see Jesus Christ in them. Amen.