

“Who Will Take Up the Mantle?”

Matthew 4:12-22

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This sermon comes at a time when people are graduating from high school and college. Although the ceremonies and the parties are not the same as pre-pandemic. It is still a time to celebrate. There will be even more celebration when the lost jobs really start returning.

I went to the monthly vigil on Tuesday morning at the Whipple Federal Building. The first time I was able to sing there in person in over a year. The last time I was there, there was another administration. But the problems of people in detention and immigration custody continue, even if there is new ICE leadership. The good words about embracing immigrants has not translated into policies that address the crisis of scapegoating our immigrant neighbors. So the work continues.

But there is more. I am accustomed to parking in the Fort Snelling Light Rail station lot amongst the other commuters. But when I got there at 7:10am there were only a handful of cars, a far cry from the hundreds emptying passengers ready to hop on the train 15 months ago. The smattering of cars were from other vigilers. It was a stark reminder of the change in this past year, and the work that still continues.

The question today is who will take up the mantle of leadership and in what direction will they lead us?

In these past many months, we have lost too many people. As we reopen our lives and reconnect, we can't help but feel the absence of a loved one, the empty chair at the table. There's a wisdom at the Seder meal to have an empty seat. It represents Elijah the prophet, but it also represents our loved ones who are no longer here with us. And like Elijah of old, we are asked to keep that seat available in case someone is ready to take on Elijah's mantle and bring a sense of hope to the people. Who will take up the mantle?

Later on today, the UBC Council will meet to put the final touches on the budget in preparation for our June 13th annual meeting. The results of their work will be put into the annual report which will be in your hands or on line in the next week or two in time for you to read it and absorb it. The current leadership has able-ly held things together during these twin pandemics. Some key leadership positions will change in the coming weeks. Who will take up the mantle of leadership?

In the streets, we still see signs and painted murals which say, “George Floyd, you changed the world.” The implied question is, who will take up his mantle?

Are we the ones everyone has been waiting for? Who will take up the mantle?

Jesus began his ministry in earnest after John the Baptist was arrested. John was arrested for being a rabble-rouser. He was arrested for planting the insurrectionist idea that Caesar was not God. They recognized a different sovereign. He baptized people, Jesus included, saying that we are beholden to a new set of rules. Rules where people matter. Rules where the poor are valued. Rules where outcasts are welcome at the table. It was good news for the movement made up of misfits, but also those who read the Torah and discovered it's prophetic power. The Torah warns against unchecked power.

And then John was arrested. He was arrested for sedition. For being a trouble-maker. For saying things that the king didn't like, or that made him look bad. Herod had a fragile ego. John would soon be executed on Herod's order, for making good trouble. It's no accident that John the Baptist resembles Elijah the prophet.

Who will take up the mantle?

After John was arrested, Jesus had a choice to make. He could have become an ascetic, removing himself from society and starting a commune of like-minded people, unsullied by the politics of the world. They could be safe there, performing their baptismal rituals and cleansing themselves from earthly stains.

That was one way he could go. But I imagine he would have to deal with the demons of guilt that would plague him. His cousin John taught him about the Torah and the need to cleanse yourself not just *from* something but *for* something. When we take on the Baptismal waters, we do so to repent from our sins and to embrace a more fitting Gospel lifestyle.

Jesus must have been thinking of this as he walked the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Today's scripture says that when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he left home and made his home by the sea of Galilee in the town of Capernaum, which means he moved out of his parents' house and tried on adulting. This was the ancient territory given to Jacob's sons Zebulun and Naphtali. 700 years earlier the northernmost areas of Israel, Zebulun and Naphtali were conquered by the Assyrians. The prophet Isaiah promised that their shame will not last forever. One day a new messenger will emerge from their land. This new leader will bring light to those caught in the gloom of despair. Those who felt forgotten would see and feel and smell and taste the hope of God once again. The brutality of their past will be exposed and they would be a part of this new community. This means upsetting the status quo—looking for and at a new economy.

In today's scripture, Jesus is all grown up. He's left hom. He's returned from the wilderness. He's ready to get on with it.

John the Baptist has been arrested and he needs to take up his mantel. For when one prophet is cut down, the movement needs another prophet to carry on the work. That's the way the movement becomes immortal. It is resurrected each time a new person takes up the mantel.

Jesus saw fisher-people by the water mending their nets. Not the best candidates to lead a movement. Eventually there would be others, some more well-healed to join the movement. But it started with the fishermen, Peter, Andrew, John and James. Jesus' first sermon after John's arrest was a short one: Matthew tells us that after John was arrested, Jesus began saying "repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

The compelling word that Jesus gave after John was arrested was, "Repent." It's another way of saying turn around. Do something different. Don't just look out for yourself, but look out for others. And join with those who are likewise ready to turn around as well.

He could have said, "keep your head down".

He could have said, "Agree to disagree."

He could have said, "Be careful of your tax exempt status."

But he didn't. He said repent. The Kingdom of heaven has come near—or better yet, the Kingdom of heaven is at hand—or the great economy is at hand. Not in another world, but in this world—A decidedly different kingdom than the one that currently calls the shots. Be part of a better movement. Turn around. Repent of your complicity.

He tells them that what they are doing is great, even noble and sustainable for their families. It's a good economic plan. Fish and provide for you community.

But something that Jesus said caused them to stop, think again and imagine not just fishing for walleye or pike, but for people. Luring them to a new way of being in the world. Engaging them with a new set of tools. Setting their minds free. Unbinding them from the chains and the nets that have entrapped them. Opening their eyes to see, perhaps for the first time. I'm going to make you fishers of men and women. How's the song go?

Open mine eyes that I may see
 Glimpses of truth though hast for me
 Place in my hands the wonderful key
 That shall unclasp and set me free
 Silently now I wait for thee
 Ready my God thy will to see
 Open mine eyes illumine me, Sprit divine.

Let's take care of this small economy, but let's also look at the Great Economy. The Kin-dom of God. The really good news.

The would-be disciples left their nets and joined in a new economy. The Bible never tells us how they ate or provided for their families. But the foolhardy idea to follow Jesus was compelling enough to cause them to imagine and then practice something completely different. A Great Economy a sacred economy. No more bowing to profane empires. No more waiting for the revolution to eventually come by the benevolence of the King. This is a Great Economy. A new responsibility.

After John's arrest it ceased to be *Chronos* time, when everything just proceeded on like before. After John was arrested, it became *Kairos* time. God's time. Pay attention. Wake up. Do things differently. Repent. Turn around. Take up the mantle and make it your own.

The Gospel always leaves us with a choice. The mantle is always right in front of us. What do we do with it? While you are thinking about that, ponder this quote from Martin Luther King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail. It was written after Martin was arrested. It was written after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, after Emmitt Till was lynched, after death threats and after the writing was on the wall that Martin might receive the same treatment. Here's what he wrote:

Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

Maybe it's time for us to take up the mantle. The authority, the inspiration of God's chosen one. For maybe God chooses us day after day. Maybe we are the ones God has been waiting for.