

The Rev. Michael J. Bridge
Sermon- Matthew 4:12-23
Sunday, January 22, 2017

Beginning a Ministry

1. Carrie Fisher recently wrote an autobiography, which I believe was one of several that she wrote about different aspects of her life. The cover art had her as Princess Leia of *Star Wars*, and the title of the book was a clear *Star Wars* reference. I saw this book recommended on Amazon the day after she died, so I decided to read the reviews.
2. The reviews were mostly positive, but among the negative ones were complaints that it told almost nothing about her life relating to *Star Wars*. On each of the negative reviews that mentioned this there were several comments saying that she had already written books about that and that they should review whether the book was good, not whether it had the info in it that the reader had wanted.
 - a. Of course, the response to this is that the book was clearly advertised as an autobiography of the actress who played Princess Leia, complete with references to it in the title.
3. Writing memoirs or autobiographies has become the commonplace these days for famous people. If there is a person we like we may be inclined to read their memoirs, and we may find ourselves disappointed because they think parts of their life are worth highlighting or sharing, but those may not be the parts of their life that we are particularly interested in.
4. One of the questions I have fielded with some regularity is why we don't know much of anything about Jesus' childhood. There was a movie a year or two ago that sought to fill in the blanks, but we must really be careful about watching such things and taking them as anything more than fiction. The truth is, we know very little about his childhood, and that is because his four biographers focused on the parts of his life that mattered- the incarnation, his ministry, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension.
5. Matthew 3 ends with Jesus' baptism. The beginning of chapter 4 is his time in the desert being tempted. This is a transition from his early life to his public ministry. When we get to Matthew 4:12, we are at the beginning of his ministry, and thus, the beginning of that which is relevant to what we need to know about Jesus. It would be great to know if he played sports as a twelve-year-old, but that information wouldn't affect the knowledge we need for our eternal hope.

Preaching the Kingdom

1. To begin his ministry, Jesus set up shop in Capernaum. We are then told, "From that time Jesus began to preach..." This is a transition in the text taking us from his life of relative obscurity into the beginning of his public ministry.
2. Verse 17 is also important because it tells us what his ministry was about. From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
 - a. The rest of the gospel is about preaching this message. What was the message? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
 - b. The dominant theme of Jesus' ministry was the kingdom. It wasn't healing. It wasn't justice. It wasn't miracles. It wasn't even himself. It was the kingdom.
3. It is important that we understand the focus of Jesus' ministry if we are to understand the focus of our own. It is not at all uncommon to have churches and ministries focus on

healing, miracles, God's blessing in our present lives, politics, America and American politics, Israel, gifts of the Spirit, feeding the poor, enacting social change, etc.

- a. Don't get me wrong, many of these things are definitely worth our time to study and focus on to a degree. But if they are the primary thrust of an entire church, then the primary message of Jesus' own ministry has been lost, and we miss the point.
4. What does it mean that Jesus' focus was on the kingdom? Jesus understood, from an eternal perspective, that God had created people to be in relationship with him. He created an earthly kingdom, Israel, to be his people for a time. These people were to represent God to the world by living in faithfulness to his covenant commands. In so doing, they would show the nations what God's kingdom is like, and thus, what God is like.
5. Israel failed dramatically at this task, which is something God knew would happen. The OT scriptures are full of promises of a restoration of the kingdom that was lost, first when Israel was divided into two kingdoms, and later when the kingdoms were conquered and sent into exile. But those promises of restoration weren't about the simple establishment of an earthly political kingdom. They were promises of an eternal kingdom that would be everything that Israel could never be. And that kingdom would be ruled by the Messiah who would sit on an everlasting throne with all authority and power.
6. Jesus arrived to usher that kingdom in. Jesus, the King of the kingdom, brought the kingdom of heaven closer to the people than it had ever been by walking in the midst of the world as the King. His message, his purpose, was to preach repentance and call people to turn from sin; and to die to atone for their sin, so that they could become citizens of the eternal kingdom of heaven.
 - a. Repent. Live like the people of God. I will die to pay for the sins that separate you from him. My Father will send the Holy Spirit to come upon you and dwell within you so that you can live as citizens of this kingdom. And one day, I will return to finally establish this kingdom forever and ever.
7. That is the message that Jesus came to proclaim. I have heard and been told that if we aren't doing miracles then we aren't doing what the NT says we should be doing. I have been told that I need to spend more time on current events and political topics. But my role as a pastor and our role as a church is to proclaim the kingdom; to call others into it; and to pray that the Holy Spirit draws them to true repentance that they should become citizens of that kingdom just as we who are in Christ are citizens of the kingdom of heaven.
8. It seems fitting given that today is our annual meeting, that this passage should serve as a reminder of what our purpose is as we elect a new vestry and chart the course for New Life for the year (and years) to come.
 - a. Should our purpose as those redeemed by Christ not be the same as his own purpose? If his primary message was the kingdom of God, and his primary mission to bring others into it, then it seems only fitting that these should be our primary focus as well.