

Circle of Mercy Sermon
Matthew 4:12-23
by Missy Harris
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Held in the Great Hands of Light

“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.” These words from the prophet Isaiah have been in my heart and mind over the past few weeks.

I’ve spent the last couple of days, watching the events happening in our country from a distance. I was in Winston-Salem from Thursday until yesterday, at a gathering with other clergy from all across North Carolina and Virginia. Between our meeting times, I found my way to a TV or a radio or my cell phone to see or hear what was happening. On Friday, there was a lot that I didn’t want to see, but I couldn’t not see it. I just couldn’t look away.

Yesterday, I couldn’t look away for a different reason. I couldn’t soak in enough of the images and descriptions of women and men and children who gathered in places all over the world, raising their voices collectively in peaceful demonstrations, proclaiming who we are and who we are not, bearing witness to the values of equality, freedom, justice, respect, and dignity. It was beautiful and inspiring, and I was grateful for all of you who were standing up and speaking out. It felt like one of those moments when the kingdom of heaven had come near. However, I don’t think any of us are under the illusion that after yesterday our work is done. We know that there is much work still to be done. There are so many people who have been ignored, left out, frustrated and abused by the very systems from which we all benefit and profit. Conversations about these divisions and frustrations prefaced the marching of women in Washington yesterday – regarding whose voices were privileged and whose voices were left out.

I saw a sign that read: Ok nice white women, will you be there when Black Lives Matter groups are marching next week? It’s a good and fair question that we keep in front of us.

Because we have witnessed – not only yesterday but over the course of history – the power and hope that rise up when we stand up, join our voices together and recognize that we ALL need each other – now more than ever. We need everyone who was cheering and marching yesterday.

The harder truth that some of us may need to wrestle with is that we ALSO need everyone who was cheering and celebrating on Friday. I’ll be honest, this is the place where I need to linger and do some serious praying and soul-searching. When watching the spectacles that continue to unfold daily in front of us, I have some not-so-Jesus-like thoughts spinning around in my heart and mind and spirit, the depth of which has been quite jarring to me. What does it mean for me to need the beloved children of God who were cheering and celebrating on Friday? What does that look like? Is it actually possible for me to embody love and care toward those who make me so incredibly angry?

Another sign I saw read: It's so bad, even introverts are here.

I thought about this and wondered . . . might this have been a sign that Jesus would have carried around? There are so many times and places in the course of his ministry (just like in our text today) when he withdrew or stepped away, took some time apart from the crowds and the work he was called to do – to reframe, to regroup, to recalibrate. Then he was able to walk right back into the midst of the crowds, toward the demands and the pressures that faced him as he continued the work and ministry that his cousin John had started.

Our text today follows two important events in Jesus' life: Jesus' baptism by John, where he was surrounded by the crowds of people who were seeking John out; and Jesus' forty days alone in the wilderness, into which he was led by the Spirit, where he faced and overcame multiple temptations by the tempter.

As soon as Jesus returned from the wilderness, he heard the news that his beloved cousin, friend and teacher John had been arrested. John was not there. Jesus couldn't tell him about what he had experienced in the wilderness, what he had seen and heard and felt, how he had struggled and agonized and overcome. He was on his own.

So Jesus withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum. He traveled to the margins – away from Jerusalem, to the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali, places that had been occupied by a litany of empires over many centuries. It was there he began to continue proclaiming John's message – on the margins, in an occupied land.

It's striking to me that Jesus – in spite of what struggles he might have been feeling within himself after John's arrest and their separation – his message was on point, consistent with the message of John, the one who had prepared the way. The message was simple and clear – a call, not only to repentance but also a call to recognition that the kingdom of heaven has come near, when Jesus (grieving John's absence) and his hearers (living in an occupied land) might have felt like everything BUT the kingdom of heaven had come near to them.

John was out of the picture, but this did not mean that Jesus carried on his work alone. He needed companions and friends. While he was in Galilee, he called four fishermen to join him. He called Simon (also known as Peter) and his brother Andrew from their work, as they were casting a net into the lake. He called brothers James and John, away from mending nets in their father Zebedee's fishing boat. All four immediately left the work that they were doing and followed Jesus, as he went throughout Galilee, "teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and sickness." We don't have a lot of details. Matthew just tells us that they jumped right in with Jesus and followed where he led.

His message was that the kingdom of God had come near. But what did that actually mean? Maybe they heard something from Jesus they hadn't quite heard in the same way before. Maybe they heard something that sounded way better than what they were doing in the occupied land where they lived.

I could philosophize all day about what it might mean, but I am convinced that it is the poets,

musicians, artists and story-tellers are the ones in this moment of our own history who remind us exactly what it looks like when the kingdom of heaven has come near, so I imagine that Jesus might have had at least a few stories that intrigued these fishermen and drew them in, though we don't get those details from Matthew.

Over the past several weeks, I have caught a few glimpses from storytellers in our midst who have pointed to moments of the kingdom of heaven coming near in times and places when it seems like the kingdom of heaven is the furthest thing from our reality.

First, the 5-3-1 event that Gareth and Brian hosted at The Block, where stories were told by five people, songs were sung and one action was highlighted. Each of the elements of the event bore witness (in ways that are too many to name here) to the great light that reminds us the kingdom of God is always near. You should try to catch the next round of this event.

Second, when I was away with the youth at a retreat in Blowing Rock last weekend, our plans for snow tubing were rained and warm-weathered out, so we decided to go see the movie *Hidden Figures*. If you haven't seen it yet, you need to go this week. It is a movie about three African-American women mathematicians who worked for NASA in the 1960's and provided critical mathematical data needed to launch the program's first successful space missions.

Did you know that African American women engineers and mathematicians were behind the success of the space program? You should learn about all of them, but I'll mention one here tonight who was featured in the film – Dorothy Vaughn. Dorothy led a group of African American women who performed mathematical computations – by hand – for the space program. Dorothy and the women she worked with were relegated to a building a good distance away from their white (mostly male) counterparts who performed the same work.

As Dorothy began to see the “writing on the wall” that their jobs would become obsolete with the IBM computers that were quickly moving in to replace their pen and paper/board and chalk calculations, she found a way to teach herself and the other women FORTRAN, a new computer language that would eventually enable them to be the ones who actually knew how to program and make the computers run. She did all of this behind the scenes, under the radar, planning all the while to position herself and the other African American women who worked with her to be the experts, while their white male and female counterparts were left standing with their jaws dropped in disbelief that she was the one who had the skills and knowledge to operate new systems that the white men could not even get to do simple operations.

Back and forth, between being at the forefront and withdrawing behind the scenes doing research and subversively teaching the women who worked with her, Dorothy Vaughn was consistently a great light who enabled the people around her to see that the kingdom of heaven had come near – that there was hope in the midst of a system that constantly told them they were less than human.

Yesterday, I met an African American pastor who lives in the eastern part of our state. He is the son of a sharecropper, and he spoke of growing up in the midst of frustration, embarrassment and exploitation of a system, rooted in our collective history of slavery and Jim Crow and the many ways that this history has continued to play out over the course of his life.

He is a bi-vocational pastor, and at one point he became quite frustrated with his congregation and he had a tendency toward responding in anger. His congregation was aging, in an area where drug and substance abuse were rampant. Over the period of a couple of years he was doing at least one funeral a week in his community.

One day he was driving along the highway, and in a moment of deep frustration he pulled over on the side of the road and started praying. As he was praying, he looked up and saw fields, filled with crops and had an image of his church farming, using their property, which is located in a food desert, to plant food. He dismissed this quickly. Working in the fields was the last thing he wanted to do, having grown up as the son of a sharecropper.

But the image wouldn't let him go. He half-heartedly put out word that they were going to start a program and had some people from the church show up one summer morning, just in case any of the children from the neighborhood came. He thought they could handle it because he didn't really expect anyone to respond to the invitation.

That morning he got a call from one of the members of the church telling him he needed to get to the church as soon as possible. As it turned out, over 100 kids showed up that morning ready to join them, but the church (and the pastor) had not prepared at all. Long story short, they quickly jumped into action to get prepared. Their church began a summer and after-school program where youth ages 5-18 tend a 25-acre garden, manage 150 beehives, provide food to their local community and offer educational programs at the church and community events.

The pastor, in the midst of a time of deep anger and frustration, when he thought nothing would come of his efforts – especially to do something that was so complicated, that he had avoided because of his personal history as the son of a sharecropper, was a great light who invited the people around him to see that the kingdom of heaven had come near. He had a hard time believing it was possible. But he ended up joining in the work alongside them.

I had a chance to spend a little bit of time this past Wednesday with Arturo and Viviana. (Many thanks to Susanne for your translation for us all.) I do hope we will get a chance to hear more from them in the future. Their story and the story of their community are amazing. One of the questions that they shared that is a central part of their work is this: If God were a little girl, how would that change how we treat our children? each other?

It's a question that helps Viviana, in particular, cross all kinds of boundaries in her work with World Vision (an international, conservative Christian group) working together to fight human trafficking, especially the trafficking of children. Viviana and Arturo are great lights, inviting the people around them (near and far) to see that the kingdom of heaven has come near, that it is possible to cross boundaries that seem impenetrable.

When I heard their question, in the context of their work, it made me wonder what question or questions we might need to be asking ourselves and asking each other in this current moment in our collective history. I don't have an answer for that yet. But, for me, I think it might have something to do with the inner struggle of anger and frustration I feel when I consider that I need

– not only the people who were marching yesterday, but also the ones who were cheering and celebrating on Friday.

The kingdom of heaven came near to this rag-tag group of fishermen when Jesus crossed paths with them in Galilee. They recognized it and responded to it, even if they didn't fully comprehend or understand it. Something new was being born, and they wanted to be part of that new thing.

I'm guessing Jesus probably knew it wasn't something new. It was the same message that God had been extending to people since the beginning of time – a call to be in relationship, a call to care for each other and all of creation, a call to go into the places where we least expect to find any sort of connection or common ground.

Just after Jesus began his ministry, called the disciples and traveled around for a while teaching and proclaiming the good news and curing diseases and sickness, he went up the mountain and the disciples came to him and he began teaching them what we refer to as *The Sermon on the Mount*. There and throughout the rest of Matthew, Jesus is teaching the disciples how to recognize that the kingdom of heaven has already come near – how to recognize what it looks like, what it feels like, what it sounds like, what it tastes like.

They kept forgetting. We keep forgetting too. We are still trying to understand what this means and what it requires of us. Just ask the folks in the Sermon on the Mount group who have been meeting monthly for the past year and a half. We are still trying to pay attention and reorient our thinking to this “kingdom coming near” way of seeing the world.

The beautiful thing is that God keeps extending the invitation to us, calling us to drop our nets and leave our boats, inviting us to reconsider and question what the world tells us (or what we tell each other) is most or least important right now.

God continually draws us toward the path that helps us see a little more clearly that the kingdom of heaven already surrounds us all. It is as close to us as the person sitting next to us. It is as close to us as the breath we breathe. And if we can remember this in as many moments as possible, we might be able to recognize the great lights that illumine the way for us.

I have decided that this year, I will try to memorize poetry as a spiritual practice. There's something about being able to draw from the deep wells of beauty that the poets offer that helps me re-frame, re-imagine, re-orient myself when I get stuck.

The poem I started with was Mary Oliver's *Why I Wake Early*. And I end with this poem because it feels like the perfect invitation to enter into each day, ready to welcome the relentlessness of the kingdom coming near to us, even when we are feeling miserable and crotchety:

Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who make the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety-
best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens
to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us the warm touching,
to hold us in the great hands of light-
good morning, good morning, good morning.
Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.

Something is being born right now in our midst. Let's remain with the laboring long enough to see that it's not something new at all. Let's remain and conspire with each other, literally breathe together. Let's be willing to walk toward, rather than away from each other. Let's be willing to be caught up with all of God's children and the whole of creation in the great hands of light that already embrace us all.

Amen.