



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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A Different Story—A Better Way

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SCRIPTURE: 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 lake, in the territory of Zebulon and Naphtali,¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Land of Zebulon, 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 lake—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.

SERMON:

Over the years I have preached a number of Epiphany sermons here, as Brent often takes time away during the season. One particularly memorable one was three years ago. It was the conjunction of three significant events: the inauguration of a new president, Martin Luther King Day and the first Woman’s March. My sermon was called “Looking for Light in the Shadow of Death.” I worked hard on it, and indeed, I still think it was one of the best sermons I ever wrote. Sadly, it is not the best sermon I ever gave, because some of you will recall the plumbing failed us that morning, and the toilets weren’t working, so we abbreviated the service and sent everybody home. There’s a parable in there somewhere, although I’m not sure what it is.

So here I am, and here we are, three years later with the same text: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in the shadow of death, on them has light shined.”

When I approach a text to preach, I begin with a series of questions. It’s a bit like reporting a news story: Who? What? When? Where? And I like to add Why? Some of these questions we can dispense of quickly. The “who” question is Matthew, and we don’t really know who he is, but we do know he was a Jewish Christian, which is important to remember as we shall see.

What? What manner of writing is this? This is the genre question. Is our text poetry like the Psalms, or prophecy like Isaiah? No, it’s a gospel text. What manner of writing is a gospel? It means, of course, good news. It is not an eyewitness account, but more about the *truth* of the person than the particular facts. We know that Mark wrote the first gospel about Jesus based on oral tradition, and Matthew’s gospel is a reworking of Mark.

When? When was it written? The earliest date would be 70 AD, since that is when the Romans destroyed the temple, and Matthew is aware of it. So somewhere between 70 and 100 AD, most likely in the 80’s of the first century AD.

Where? Where was it written? Perhaps in Antioch. There was a vital Jewish Christian community within the synagogue in Antioch. After the destruction of the temple there was a crisis within Judaism, and the Jewish Christians withdrew from the synagogue and created their own community. This explains some of the bitterness toward Judaism in Matthew’s gospel, especially toward the Pharisees, a regrettable feature that has been used to fuel Anti-Semitism over the centuries. But this little bit of context also answers the “why” question. Matthew is addressing these Jewish Christians struggling to form a new community as they live under the weight of an oppressive Roman Imperium. Some of the questions he raises for them are also questions for us. How shall we live humanely as followers of Jesus within a social order based on power and privilege and maintained by fear and violence?

It is important for Matthew, as it was not for Mark, to show that Jesus is the true Jewish Messiah. Where Mark, after a brief prologue, begins his gospel with John the Baptist, Matthew doesn’t get there for nearly three chapters. What is in those chapters? The first chapter is an elaborate genealogy that connects Jesus to the history of Israel, and leads to his birth. This is theology, not biology, and is meant to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s intention for the world. Chapter 2 tells us of the visit of the Magi and the flight of Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus to Egypt. These scenes, found in no other gospel, have a twofold purpose. First, they are well larded with Old Testament prophecies, as our text is today, to support Matthew’s claim that Jesus is the

Jewish Messiah, and that his story continues the story of Israel and Israel's God. This would have been important for his fledgling Jewish Christian congregation, to locate Jesus within God's activity as told in the Jewish Scriptures.

Second, Matthew wants to draw a sharp distinction between the way of the Roman imperium and the Way of Jesus. So, Matthew paints King Herod as a petty dictator surrounded by wealthy oligarchs in privileged and powerful positions. Recall how when the magi come to Herod it created fear and consternation that the birth of this newly announced king will overturn the established order, which is held up by violence or the threat of violence. Indeed, after the magi leave, Herod slaughters the innocent children to protect his reign.

You will recall how the magi were warned in a dream to go home by another road. Brent preached a good sermon on it back on Epiphany Sunday. The NRSV translates the Greek as "road," but those of you who grew up on the King James Version will recall that they went home by another "way." James Taylor has a nice song about it called "Home by another Way." Why is "way" better than road? Because the early church referred to themselves as "the Way" and Jesus himself said, "I am the Way, the truth, and the light." With road you miss some of that connection. Also, recall that the magi were Gentiles. Matthew is saying that, even though Jesus is the Jewish messiah, he has not just come for Jews, but for the whole world. That the Jewish King and his religious court, who knew the scriptures, didn't recognize the birth of Jesus, reminds us of the hiddenness of Epiphany. Epiphany means "appearance," but not everyone can see Jesus for who he really is. It takes the eyes of faith to truly see Jesus for who he is.

In Chapter 3, Matthew describes the coming of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus, where Jesus is anointed by the Holy Spirit at the River Jordan. This brings us to today's text, which describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the calling of disciples. In these three extra chapters that Matthew adds to Mark we find what I call "Epiphany According to St. Matthew." By Chapter 4 the baby Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas is all grown up, and beginning his ministry, the work that God has called him to do. And what is that ministry and what is that work, and what does it have to do with us? I plan to tell you, and so my sermon is called "A Different Story; a Better Way."

Let's look at the story first. Why a different story? It makes a difference what story is your story. Did you know you are part of a larger story? Or maybe you think you are just your own story. Duke theologian Stanley Hauerwas asks "what story do you tell when you say that you have no story?" His point is that part of the myth of modernity is that we are all just autonomous individuals, separated from larger concerns for community and story. Which can lead to us being nothing more than story-less consumers of goods and services.

“Epiphany according to Matthew” is a subversive counter-narrative to the official narrative of the Roman Imperium. The official story is that Caesar is Lord, a demigod on earth, and his power is unchallenged and complete. Israel in Matthew’s time was an occupied land, under the heel of Roman power. King Herod and his court were vassals, rich oligarch’s kept in power at the whim of Rome. Symbols of Roman power were everywhere apparent, not least in the crosses that lined the roads where brigands and unruly slaves were crucified and left to die. Matthew’s counter-narrative is that it is God, not Caesar, who is really in control, and Jesus, God’s Messiah, is the true Lord. Why is that different story so subversive? Last summer I read a book Brent gave me called *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman. It was written in 1949, which happens to be the year I was born, and it came out right before the civil rights movement got moving in the 1950’s. Thurman, a black man, was the Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. He had traveled to India and met Gandhi. He became one of the influences on one of his students, Martin Luther King, who did his doctorate at BU. In his book, Howard Thurman draws comparisons between the socio-political world that Jesus grew up in and the American South during the Jim Crow era. In both cases, powerful majorities disinherit ed powerless minorities through fear and the threat of violence. The regular lynching in Howard Thurman’s day and the regular crucifixions of Jesus’s day were both designed to instill terror in the disinherited minority and keep them in their place.

Howard Thurmond understood that Jesus had a special meaning for the disinherited, for people with their backs against the wall. He had learned the Bible by reading it out loud to his grandmother, who was born a slave and was never taught to read. One day he asked her why she never read from the letters of Paul. She said the slave owners wouldn’t let black preachers preach to them, but would bring in white preachers, and it was always Paul telling them, “Slaves, obey your masters.” “That is why I don’t want to hear from Paul!” she told him. But she also told him that the slaves would have secret church meetings in the middle of the night, and the black preachers would tell them, “You are not a slave. You are not that bad word they call you. You are a child of God. God loves you.” Imagine how powerful that message would have been to a slave. To hear that despite their powerlessness they had dignity as human beings. They heard a different story than the official story of their oppressors.

Early in September of last year, Martha and I went to a UCC Pension Board meeting in Montgomery, AL. And I have to confess that Montgomery. AL has never been on my bucket list of places to visit. But Montgomery is a bustling modern city with lots of nice restaurants and places to visit. We went to the Rosa Parks museum, which tells the inspiring story of the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956, where for thirteen months the black citizens refused to take city buses, and traveled by a motley fleet of taxis, hearses, and church buses to get to work.

We also went to the “Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration,” built near the site of the market where enslaved people were sold. We also visited the “National Memorial for Peace and Justice,” informally called the “National Lynching Memorial”. It is hard for me to talk about this, but it is part of our story.

Let me describe it for you. The memorial square has 805 hanging steel rectangles, roughly the size and shape of coffins. Each one has the names of the counties where a documented lynching took place in the United States. Each of the steel plates also has the names of the documented lynching victims (or “unknown” if the name is not known). The names and dates of documented victims are engraved on the panels. More than 4075 documented lynchings of African Americans took place between 1877, when Union troops were removed after Reconstruction, and 1950. The lynching was concentrated in 12 Southern states, but also lynchings took place in several states outside the South. I saw counties in Pennsylvania and New Jersey among others. The monument is the first major work in the nation to name and honor these victims. As you walk under these rectangles the floor slopes lower and lower, so the coffins seem to be rising above your head. It is absolutely chilling.

These thousands of extra-judicial murders took place without trials or due process. They were often community events that looked like a Fourth of July celebration or a Sunday School picnic. No one would ever be arrested, or if so, no white jury would convict. This *de facto* state-sponsored violence kept free African Americans in a state of bondage for the better part of a century, and mass incarceration of young black men and voter suppression continue to this day. The ideology of white supremacy is alive and well in America. The story *it* tells is that blacks are inferior and so can be treated unfairly and unjustly and deprived of their human rights, especially their right to vote. And now I have to tell you about Jake Williams. Jake is the owner/operator of Montgomery Tours. Martha and I stayed an extra day to go on a bus tour with Jake of route of the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March. Jake was on that march with two of his older sisters when he was 12 years old. Jake is an African-American man who owns his own company. He works for no man. He's owned restaurants, was a truck driver and teaches truck-driving at the local community college. Jake's father was a sharecropper and his mother was a domestic servant who worked for a white family.

Jake pointed out a cotton field where he had picked cotton as a boy. He said if he didn't pick his quota his mother would strike him in the head. His mother got up at 4 in the morning to walk out to the highway to hitch a ride to her white family's house, where she cleaned the kitchen and made them breakfast. She was paid \$4 a day. Jake said the sharecropper system was better for the plantation owner than slavery. The owner provided housing and you bought all your food and goods from the owner's store on credit and you were always behind. Jake told the story about how his father got behind in his credit and the owner offered to erase his debt if he would let him “have his way” with his teenage daughter. His father took a night-time job to see that didn't happen.

Jake drove us to Selma on the Jefferson Davis Highway and we had lunch at a luncheonette in Selma. Today Selma is a run-down town that fell on hard times when their local Air Force base was closed. We went to the Church where the marchers gathered on March 7, 1965. That day, the marchers headed across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The steel bridge is only 250 feet long, and it is highly arched so you can't see the other side of the Alabama River until you get to the top of the span. This became significant to the marchers since the other side of the bridge is no longer Selma, but county territory. On my trip with Jake I walked across it. I felt like I was on holy ground.

County Sheriff Jim Clark was a strict segregationist. He gathered Alabama State troopers wielding nightsticks and tear gas. He also called for every white male 22 years or older to appear to be sworn in as a posse, under an old law. These civilians showed up, many of them on horseback, with long whips and cattle prods used to herd cattle. When the marchers, led by John Lewis among others, got to the top of the bridge they were savagely set upon by the state troopers and posse men and were driven back to the church in Selma. Amelia Boynton, one of the organizers of the march was beaten unconscious by law enforcement, and a photo of her lying bleeding on the bridge was shown nationally in the media. This day's march is referred to as "Bloody Sunday."

The response to these events led President LBJ to federalize the Alabama National Guard when Governor George Wallace refused to guarantee the marchers safety. The march on March 21, is the one Jake Williams was on, protected by 19,000 Federalized Alabama National Guardsmen, Federal Marshalls and the FBI. On the second day and third day the march went through Jake's home county, Lowndes County. The marchers walked through chilling rain and camped in muddy fields. Let me tell you about Lowndes County, a majority black county. In the early Twentieth Century Alabama had passed some of the most restrictive voting laws in the land, with a poll tax and a literacy test. At the time of the march, the population of Lowndes County was 81% black and 19% white, but not a single black person was registered to vote. Not one! There were 2,240 whites registered to vote, a figure that represented 118% of the adult white population. It was the custom in many Southern counties of that era to retain white voters on the rolls after they died or moved away. If Jake had any anger or bitterness it never showed. He told us the story in a matter of fact way. Jake told us about "repercussions" to the march. "Repercussions." Few sharecroppers participated out of fear of the plantation owners, but the ones that did were kicked out of their homes, and a tent city had to be erected for temporary housing.

"Repercussions." A black woman who ran a convenience store let the marchers camp in a field she owned. Her suppliers retaliated by denying her supplies, and her business closed. "Repercussions." In Montgomery on the last night of the march, the Roman Catholic bishop let the marchers camp at a Catholic School field on a campus that housed the Catholic hospital. All the white doctors quit and the hospital closed.

The day the march ended Dr. King asked Governor George Wallace for permission to address the crowd in Montgomery, but he was refused. So, they rented a flatbed truck and put a podium on it on the street at the foot of the State House. Jake drove us to the spot. It was a few blocks from Dr. King's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. On March 25th King, before 20,000 people, delivered a speech known as "How Long? Not Long?" Let me share with you the closing paragraph (if I can get through it): I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" Somebody's asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?" Somebody's asking, "When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death? How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?" I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again." How long? Not long, because "no lie can live forever." How long? Not long, because "you shall reap what you sow." "How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a counter-narrative to the narrative that might makes right, that violence and the threat of violence can keep people subjected to injustice, that how much money you make determines your real worth. We come to church to hear a different story. The story we tell is about the true power in the universe coming to us in the man Jesus of Nazareth, who by word and deed showed us a way of compassion and forgiveness that bestows dignity and worth on every human being.

That's the different story we tell, and because of that story we seek a better Way, a way of love and justice, of truth and light. That's the story we tell our children. That's the story we try to live by. On this day in Epiphany we are no longer focused on the baby Jesus of Christmas, but on the grown-up Jesus who walked on the shores of Galilee, and said, follow me!" The one who proclaimed the good news of God's kingdom, and cured the people of all their diseases and sickness. The one who gently showed us the power of love as the greatest power there is. The one who died on a Roman cross, forgiving his enemies, and turned the cross from a symbol of oppression into the Way of mercy and peace. This is the different story we tell, and the better Way we follow. And in whatever darkness we find ourselves, whatever darkness threatens our community, whatever darkness threatens our nation, whatever darkness threatens our world, we know it will not overcome us, and may we always move toward the light, even our Lord Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. Amen.

Rev. Rick Floyd, Pastor