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Take a Beat

Matthew 4:12-23

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.

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It is always a chilling sight when, as you are driving in your car, you hear sirens and you see flashing lights of fire engines, ambulances and police cars attending to an accident at the side of the road. Traffic may be stopped for a time -- definitely slower as you approach. The thought goes through your mind: I hope no one is seriously injured. Even for the driver, it is hard not to resist looking at the scene as you make your way by the accident. The term for this is ‘rubbernecking’ and it can bring traffic to a standstill on both side of an interstate. It is particular vocation – first responders – for we can only imagine what they encounter doing their jobs each day. Trying to be detached enough to provide help and comfort to the victims.

“Stay calm. Take a deep breath. Don’t lose your head. Hold on: ride out the storm. There is light at the end of the tunnel.” These are words and phrases we often hear and offer in times of great stress, grief, confusion and doubt.

Maybe I’ve been watching too many British detective shows recently, but I would add another current expression to the list: “Take a beat” – which means to take a pause or step back before reacting.

At a time when it is hard not to respond and react instantly to what we see and hear out in our world today, this counsel may be worthy of our attention.

The gospel we hear today begins: When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. It was devastating news.

Jesus withdrew. He retreated. He took a beat. In tradition, this verse has been referred to as the “retreat verse.” One of my favorite commentators Herbert O’Driscoll suggested that this one verse should prompt Christians to “stop, look and listen.”

The word ‘retreat’ instantly congers up two kinds of images. As a verb, it means an action or a process that is opposite of attack. A call to retreat is, without question, the hardest order a battle commander can make, yet when under heavy fire and calculating the potential of heavy losses, it is at time necessary as a last resort. The word ‘retreat’ as a noun is a word that the church uses for an intentional time away for quiet and prayer.

When we look at the life of Christ, it is no wonder why he so often found it necessary to locate a place of quiet away from his growing number of followers. Henry Drummond, a Scottish evangelist of the 19th century wrote that “Christ’s life outwardly was one of the most troubled lives that was ever lived: tempest and tumult, tumult and tempest, the waves breaking over it all the time.”

I feel like we are living through days when waves are breaking over us all the time.

We read in the gospels how people followed Jesus. The sick and the dying were brought to him. Crowds pressed in on him thinking that they only needed to touch his clothing to be healed. It always seemed like his enemies and adversaries were close by – hovering – mumbling under their breath, posing questions to entrap him. Fully human Jesus had to be pushed to his emotional and physical limits. Yet again and again the presence within him told him when it was time to step back.

And when it is time to lead by example, to heal, to love and to demand more from those who have and use power to oppress and exclude.

Hearing that his cousin and mentor John the Baptist had been arrested was one of them. In between the feeding of the five thousand and walking on the water, Jesus went up to a mountain to pray. It was atop that mountain that he was famously transfigured in front of Peter, John and James. Yet his brief respite would not last. They came back down from that mountain and were met by the cries of the people for healing. The needs and demands of the world were always in front of him.

You and I are not Jesus. Many of us do not live in between tempest and tumult all our days. On our better days, we hope that our actions might show others that we are his followers.

And we can all experience a sense of being pushed to our emotional, physical and spiritual limits: caring for loved ones, living through the breakup of a marriage, the pressure of jobs that require early mornings, late nights, working outdoors in cold winters and hot summers, and uncertain job security. And when we turn on the news, or our phones starts to light up. Few of us can avoid the storms of an unpredictable life.

I’ve been thinking about that verse from last Sunday’s gospel. (John 1) When two of Jesus’ disciples started following him, and he turned to them and asked: “What are you looking for?” When they wanted to know where he was staying, he simply said: “Come and see.”

Stepping back, going apart, taking a few moments or hours to clear your mind and lighten the weight you are carrying does not have to mean that we are hiding or avoiding conflict or problems. Like Jesus, we are called into community. We are a Body. We are not alone.

Our Men's Group has been reading the classic book 'Mere Christianity' by C.S. Lewis which began as a series of radio talks in London during World War II. His take was that "the one really adequate instrument for learning about God is the whole Christian community. Waiting for God (Him) together. United together in a body, loving one another, helping one another, showing God to one another. We are like players in one band."

This is the spirit of a day like today when we gather – at least 35 of us we hope for a quorum – to consider what God is doing in and through us here. It may seem mundane and undramatic in comparison to world events, yet God shows up.

The simple lesson of today's gospel is this: in order to exhale, we need in inhale. In order to serve, to care and nurture and provide for those who rely on us, do not hesitate to take a beat, take a pause, and see how God in Christ can inform and shape what we do, how we love, where we put our resources and time, what is right and just and wrong and unjust and what it is we might do or say about it.

What can we do? Keep watch. Keep vigil. Pray. Stand up. Be counted. Volunteer. Call a neighbor. Take a friend to lunch. Come spring: plant a garden. Hope and work for a more Christ-like world.

We pray: Inspire us with your Spirit of wisdom: plant seeds of your vision in our hearts and minds; give us humor and give us humility in our working with one another, so that we may know the privilege of participating in the coming of your Kingdom. Amen.