

Whose People Are We?

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Isaiah 9:1-4

Matthew 4:12-23

About 750 years or so before Herod arrested John the Baptist and Jesus returned to the region of his childhood, the Assyrian Empire attacked the Jewish nations of Israel and Judah. Judah, where Isaiah lived in the capital of Jerusalem, survived the invasion because an outbreak of infectious disease swept through the Assyrian army and forced them to abandon the siege of Jerusalem. Israel, however, the northern of the two nations, fell. It ceased to exist as an independent country. That land included the territories of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, an area we know better by its common name in Jesus' day: Galilee.

Isaiah, catching his breath as the Assyrian armies retreated, spoke a word of hope to the survivors of Israel. He addressed a dwindling population. Unlike most empires of ancient Mesopotamia, the Assyrians actually resettled large groups of conquered people. Scholars have estimated that over 3 million were displaced over 250 years. The result is the disappearance of ten of the twelve tribes descended from Jacob. The "Ten Lost Tribes" lived on the lands conquered by the Assyrians.

Isaiah's vision of a nation increasing in joy, freed from their burdens and restored to their homes, did not take place for those he addressed. Centuries later Matthew considered the way Jesus' ministry had begun in the backwater region of Galilee and made the connection: in Jesus there was joy. In Jesus there was liberation. In Jesus there was light.

Matthew, and for that matter most of the Gospel writers and early Christians, might have preferred Jesus' ministry to get a different starting point. Jerusalem. That was the spot. Right in the center of things. Luke, you may remember, told stories about the child Jesus in Jerusalem, once as a newborn and once as a twelve-year-old. The Jesus story led toward Jerusalem, but shouldn't it have started there, too?

To some degree Jesus was "on the run" from the law. After his baptism, he seems to have spent some time – we don't know how long – in the Jordan valley among those clustered about John the Baptist. Then John was arrested by Herod Antipas and, according to the first century historian Josephus, imprisoned at Machaerus on the east shore of the Dead Sea. Capernaum on the shores of Galilee was a fair distance from Machaerus, but ironically it was still within the territory Herod governed. I don't know if anybody was looking for Jesus except that somebody might have grabbed him off the streets on suspicion of being an associate of John the Baptist.

Jesus didn't choose to hide. He began to bring healing to people. He began to speak to what were probably slowly growing crowds. He began to preach during synagogue worship. He brought them the exact same basic message that John the Baptist had: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

As Raj Nadella writes at Working Preacher, "The devil tried to coopt him. The empire tried to threaten him. But nothing seemed to deter him. Jesus withdrew into Galilee spatially but, missionally, he stepped right in the heart of the empire. He boldly stepped into a dangerous space so he can lead others to safety."

He started with four fishermen, and he started as he went on: with an invitation. As Dr. Nadella writes, "The Roman empire relied on threat, coercion and enticements to recruit people into its military. The new kingdom, on the other hand, inspires them to participate in it."

Jesus didn't offer a \$50,000 signing bonus. He offered a challenge.

He called it "fishing for people." I wonder how Peter, Andrew, James, and John heard it. Fishing for fish meant long, backbreaking hours on tasks ranging from hauling nets to mending them, sailing boats and patching them. It meant a limited customer base, because the Romans controlled the fishing economy of Galilee. Through a combination of market control and heavy taxes, they kept the fishing families at a subsistence level and passed the fruits of their labor up the chain of wealthy landowners, nobles, and royalty.

Jesus clearly didn't mean that. He doesn't seem to have charged anyone for healing. He doesn't seem to have asked a fee for preaching. He did accept the invitations of local religious leaders for dinner. He did accept the financial support of some who traveled with him.

As David Lose writes at Working Preacher, "...Perhaps we might re-imagine just what it is that Jesus is calling these first disciples to be and do: fishers of people. And that implies relationships. Jesus, that is, calls these first disciples into relationship — with himself, with each other, and with all the various people they will meet over the next few years and, indeed, the rest of their lives."

Relationship. Not exploitation. Relationship. Not domination. Relationship. Not condemnation.

Relationship.

To my mind, that's a different kind of fishing. These fishermen care for the fish. These fishermen recognize themselves as related to the fish. These fishermen realize that they, that we, that all of us are fish, each one looking for the safety of the school, each one looking for the guidance of the group.

And Jesus said, "Follow me."

There are a lot of people who'll encourage you to follow them, their ways, their values, and their commitments. Some of them you should probably follow. For the most part, parents are pretty reliable guides, though those of us who are parents know that we're not perfect, and those of who've had parents know for sure that they weren't perfect. Tragically, parents can fail dramatically and disastrously, and sometimes they do. It takes a lot of work by a lot of people to help the children recover and heal. It takes a lot of work by a lot of people for those grieving parents to recover and heal, too.

There are people in leadership roles and it should be good to follow them, right? Employers. Managers. Bosses. Those folks are imperfect, too. Richard W. Swanson describes a kind of boss that can't be followed at *Provoking the Gospel*: "Managers who think of disruption as a management strategy want employees to be afraid that they will be fired... The only successful response is boot-licking.

"Have you ever worked for a manager like this? I have. They make the earth shake under everyone's feet and they make the shaking unpredictable, chaotic. I have worked for such managers. It doesn't turn out well. Good ideas are hidden away. Analytical critique is punished.

"...Do not confuse this disruption with the drawing-near of God's Dominion."

What did the drawing-near of God's Dominion look like? In Matthew's words: "...teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

What it doesn't look like is what we're getting from national leadership, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement's assault on Minneapolis. New York Times reporter Charles Homans, a child of that city, wrote about an encounter he witnessed on January 14th: "What was clear in person, seeing the scene outside of the frame, were the limits of this performance of power. The agents had no capacity to maintain order or much apparent interest in doing so. Their presence was a vector of chaos, and controlling it was not in their job description. All that was holding the crowd back, as far as I could tell, was the knowledge that an officer like these shot a woman a week earlier and that another shot a man up the street an hour ago. I left the scene that night certain it would happen again."

This operation and those like it in Los Angeles, Chicago, and now Maine (Maine. Really.) reveal a couple of things about U.S. immigration law. First is that much of what is legal is wrong. A favorite tactic of ICE agents outside of these enforcement sweeps has been to apprehend people when they come to immigration court, dismiss their hearings, and deport them. Apparently that's legal. If it sounds absolutely unfair, I agree with you. When people engage with the system, they should get a full hearing.

Recently agents detained a five-year-old to get his father to open the door for them, and both are now in custody in Texas. The pair have an active asylum petition. Is this legal? Frankly, I hope not, but I'm afraid that it is and it illustrates how cruel the law can be.

Some of ICE's actions, however, are clearly illegal. An internal memo has been leaked asserting that officers do not require a judicial warrant to enter a home. A federal judge in Minnesota ruled on January 17 that they do after a man was removed from his home based on an administrative warrant, one not signed by a judge. And once again, the man arrested was actively engaged in seeking proper status, and guess what? The day after his release he was taken into custody again when he appeared for an immigration hearing.

Officials have made clear that the deaths of two people at the hands of ICE officers will not be investigated. That tells me that justice has been decided. Due process has become plain force. Do what we tell you or die.

"...Teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

Our loyalty is being demanded. Our obedience is being required. Our compliance is being forced. These are not the ways of Jesus. These are not the acts of Jesus. These are not the voices of Jesus.

Whose people are we? We belong to Jesus and nobody else. When Herod threatened to arrest Jesus, do you know what he said? "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'" Let us be Jesus' people. Let us go our way and bring healing. Let us teach and proclaim good news. Let us finish our work against the forces of chaos, violence, and tyranny.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson