

The Summons of the King

Readings

Amos 3.1-11

Psalm 139.1-16

Matthew 4.12-22

Opening

If you want to envision the early days of Jesus' ministry, it sure helps if you live in East Tennessee. C.S. Lewis cautioned modern Christians against 'chronological snobbery,' and I suppose we should be aware of geographic snobbery. But it's just hard when you're surrounded by all this vast and varied beauty. Mountains, rivers, foothills, and a massive lake set the scene for the early episodes of Jesus' life. East Tennessee is more like Scotland than Galilee, but our land forms bear some resemblance to northern Israel, though our climates are vastly different.

Live here long enough and the topography of our region gets in your soul. When you see mountains on the southern horizon every day, it shapes you in ways you don't perceive. Our mountains are ever-present signs of God's beauty and grandeur in the comings and goings of the daily grind. Come to the banks and shorelines of our streams, rivers, and lakes with an exhausted spirit and you might just discover the depths of God's peace anew. God means for his world to shape our stories.

There is little question that Matthew means for these land forms to form us and how we experience the Jesus story. A river isn't just a river, it resembles the currents of time and history. A mountain isn't just a backdrop, its heights resemble the height of testing and the summit of encountering the Holy One. Plains and foothills set the stage for stories of struggle and suffering in ordinary, daily life.

Rivers, mountains, foothills, and a land-locked sea (a lake to East Tennesseans)—all these land forms appear in Matthew 3-4. Something more is going on here than a nice backdrop for Jesus' life story. Matthew is pretty clear that these locations, foretold by prophets like Isaiah, were ordained by God to be the places where Jesus would begin preaching and calling his disciples. Why here? Why Nazareth, Capernaum, Zebulun, Naphtali, Galilee by the Sea? There's a mysterious purpose in all this. That's what we're seeking to discover today.

A Historical-Geographic Tour of Galilee

So let's take a brief tour of Galilee, shall we? You'll need to have your Bible open to Matthew 4 on page ###. Before we get to Galilee, we need to follow where Matthew has taken us thus far in his story. When Jesus comes on the scene as a grown man, we first meet him at the Jordan River. I spoke on the significance of the Jordan River in Israel's history a few weeks ago; how the Jordan River from the age of Joshua becomes a place of memory of God's saving power and his call to holiness. When John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River, we're seeing the new Joshua, God's salvation in human form, who alone will live holy before the Lord.

When we come to Matthew 4, we've moved from a river to a mountain wilderness. We'll come back to the story of Jesus' temptation at the beginning of Lent, but for now, we want to see Jesus in the wilderness near Galilee. When he's tempted the Enemy carries him to the highest places—the pinnacle of the Temple, high mountain tops. The geography shows us the sign—Jesus endures the highest form of Satan's temptations. He gains victory over Satan by going *down* into the Word of God.

Then Jesus goes down to the villages of Galilee, this time leaving Nazareth behind and going to a little seaside town called Capernaum. Capernaum is within a region of northern Israel called Naphtali, beside Zebulun. Put them together and you get most of the region of Galilee. Zebulun and Naphtali don't mean as much to us. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of Jacob's sons, and Jacob gave them land in the north of Israel. They have not made the list of top ten boys' names in recent years.

We're taking a fly-over of Galilean topography, but we've got to go back in Galilee's story, too. Galilee was in the region of Naphtali, and Naphtali was one of Israel's northernmost territories. In other words, it was a borderland—pagan nations on their doorstep. And that's pretty important because God had called Israel to be a 'light to the nations.' All this land God promised to Abraham; these lands that they settled under Joshua's leadership—God gave them Naphtali and Zebulun's descendants this land to live holy before him and be a light to the nations. Galilee had all the geographic advantages to influence the nations.

Eight hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Galilee and Naphtali had the opportunity to bear witness of God's power, his beauty, his justice to the nations. Assyria was just across the border. Highways and constant traffic along Galilee's highways meant opportunity to reveal the wisdom and truth of God to bordering nations. And what did they do with that opportunity? They bent their knees to worship foreign gods. They constructed idols, shrines, and altars to false gods. They 'trampled down the poor' and turned away the afflicted among them. ¹Those who were called to be light-bearers in worship, in justice, in mercy *became* corrupt themselves. The light-bearers turned to darkness.

This is where Amos comes in. It sounds like Amos had a decent life in Tekoa, near Jerusalem. He was a shepherd and had a nice orchard of figs. Probably struggled to make ends meet, but probably had a simple, peaceful life. And then God called him out of that peaceful life. God called him out of the sheepfolds to be a prophet *against* Israel in the north—regions like Galilee in Naphtali. He told them of God's coming judgment, a prophecy we heard moments ago:

An adversary shall surround the land and bring down your defenses from you, and your strongholds shall be plundered." ²

Assyria invaded Israel over two years, defeated her, and carried her northern tribes off to exile. Who were the first to go into exile? Naphtali—Galilee. Naphtali literally became a valley of the shadow of death. The light-bearers entered a great darkness. ³

¹ Amos 2.7

² Amos 3.11

³ I have relied on the following article a great deal for geographic information and biblical interpretation:

A Light Shining in the Darkness

Things were never the same after this exile. Few, if any, returned to home to live in Galilee again. No one could end the years of darkness that covered this territory, yet Isaiah prophesied that light would return to these lands again. That is, until Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God decided to make his home in Galilee. And when Jesus makes his home in Capernaum, a village of Galilee in Naphtali, Matthew sees the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise:

“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.”

Jesus begins preaching in Galilee, ancient Naphtali, a very simple sermon, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

The Grace of Jesus in Galilee

This land, with such a tragic history and still such tremendous possibility, hears the call her mothers and fathers had not heeded: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ The land that *first* entered exile long ago become the *first* to hear Jesus’ Kingdom’s call. The mercy of God reaches down to the most recalcitrant sinners. Their ancestors had worshiped idols on these same mountains; committed injustices in the Jezreel Valley; trampled the poor in villages like Capernaum; abandoned the afflicted in towns like Nazareth. But upon this wounded land, a light shines, an invitation comes: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

Oh, consider the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. He begins preaching his Kingdom message in the heart of darkness. This is where Kingdom work begins, in places of great struggle and

Aubrey L. Taylor, *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, 2016.

great failure. He came not for the righteous, but for sinners. This is the same God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” He has not given up on Galilee. This is where he begins. He made Capernaum in Galilee his home. Because Galilee has a destiny to be a light for the nations still.

Summoned to the Kingdom

From these same districts of Galilee, Jesus moves from a general message to a personal message. The scene changes from village to shoreline. Jesus searches for his disciples, apprentices in his Kingdom. He comes upon two brothers first, Simon Peter and Andrew, fishing in the Galilee’s waters. A little while later he approaches another set of brothers, James and John of Zebedee. All four hear the same message, and it’s seemingly simple: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

I love this youthful enthusiasm. “Immediately they left their nets; immediately they left their boats and father and followed him.” And they have no idea what they are in for! They cannot see from that Galilean shoreline how their lives will change. From this shoreline, Peter cannot see he will be the first to profess Jesus as the Christ; he cannot see that he will also betray Christ three times. James doesn’t know that he will join Peter in Jesus’ inner circle, along with his brother, John. John can’t see that his life will lead him to stand with Mary at the foot of Jesus’ cross. Peter doesn’t know he’ll walk into an empty tomb on resurrection morning. All of that is hidden from them now. All they have is the call, “Follow me,” and Jesus’ promise, “I will *make* you fishers of men.”

You become who you were made to be the day you say ‘yes’ to his summons, whatever that may be. This is why we affirm the sanctity of life from conception. God creates a life to know him, love him, and serve him. The child receives a name because God desires to call them by name into relationship with himself and in service to his Kingdom.

And service in his Kingdom need not have a massive impact. You do not need to change the world; his call may not mean a job change, it might be a call to sacrificial obedience. You may be called to a life of obedient faithfulness in hiddenness or obscurity. Greatness is not

the call; obedience to his summons is. To calculate, overanalyze, fret, or fear the future of God's calling means living a half-surrendered life. God save me from a half-surrendered life.

If there is anything we ought to fear it is a half-surrendered life. And the threat of the half-surrendered life is the familiar and the comfortable. It's ever so tempting to retreat into the familiar and comfortable when you live in unstable times.

And I confess that there have been too many times when I've wished I lived in different times. It would be so much easier to live in times when our institutions were in tact. It would be so much more comfortable if we lived in times when people trusted churches, trusted pastors, looked to Christians for wisdom and counsel. It would be so much more convenient if we had charitable discourse in our time and we weren't headed toward a post-Christian culture. If, if, if. God save us from nostalgia, God save me from fear of the future; give me courage to answer your summons in these times.

When God summoned Amos to be his prophet, he had to leave his life in the south and move north, proclaiming words no one wanted to hear. He could have refused the call, tended his sheep, eaten fresh figs and veal cutlets the rest of his days. But no, he answered the summons of God, traveled north, and entered the field of action.

And God loved Galilee. Surely there were more quiet and comfortable places to be. But no, God the Son roams the riverbanks, wilderness plains, mountains, and shorelines where people dwell in the shadow of darkness. And he calls twelve humble men into the field of action because their very hour had come.

God has this great affection for calling the unimpressive and the inadequate. Moses wasn't a gifted public speaker. Amos was a shepherd, with no training as a prophet. Peter, Andrew, James, and John knew the depths and shallows of the Sea of Galilee, but not the depths of the Kingdom of God. But God has chosen the weak things of this world because he can form them in his image and likeness. The strong and overconfident resist the molding of God in their pride. But give the almighty God your simple faith, your trusting 'yes,' and you become clay in the potter's hands.

The Field of Action

When God summons you onto the field of action, I suppose there is only question you need ask, "Will it be more burdensome to say 'yes' or to run from God?" Jonah provides some nice insight into this question. Once you say 'yes' you need not be concerned with questions of where? when? who? how? For all those answers are held in trust by the One who has called you. And he has promised and pledged that you do not 'make' yourself. Remember his pledge to the four brother disciples, "I will make you into fishers of men." I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, not only the Maker of my life, but the Maker of my vocation in his Kingdom. And to quote St Paul, "Faithful is he who calls you, who also will do it."

Back to the Mountain

I want to thank you for joining me on this brief tour of Galilee. We press onward next week, the geography changing once more in Matthew's story. Summoned disciples who answer the Lord's call must learn the ways of His Kingdom. They must repent, change their minds, and learn the words of God anew. And for that we must go up another mountain. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.