

## TRANSFER OF POWER

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Matthew 4:12-23
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On Friday, as a nation, we witnessed the transfer of power in our government. The voters have spoken and the new government clearly brings a different vision for the country than the previous administration. As this new vision is hammered out in policy and personnel, we will learn the details of where the administration stands on the matters of national security, relations with our neighbors, relations with our adversaries, the environment, climate change, fiscal policy, and every other issue. This new government will define role of the U.S. in the world. What type of military leader will we be? Will we be an advocate for human rights? Will we engage the world or choose to isolate ourselves in nationalism? Will we seek vengeance when crossed or shall we choose to embrace our better angels?

The first presidential inauguration took place on April 30, 1789, on the balcony of Federal Hall<sup>1</sup> in New York City. George Washington, the war hero, was a reluctant president—extremely anxious that he was not up to the task of being head of state. He was exceedingly worried about getting this experiment in democracy off on the right foot. He knew how delicate it was.

Washington won the election in a landslide. He had been chosen unanimously by all 69 of the presidential electors. He was re-elected four years later and ultimately declined serving a third term. He did not want to establish any precedent that resembled kingship.

Following his swearing in, Washington went inside Federal Hall to deliver his inaugural address to the Congress. One senator recorded that Washington was "agitated and embarrassed" and that his hands visibly shook during his brief speech.

Washington served his country well and the power of the presidency has transferred peacefully 45 times.

If I were to ask you what today's reading is about, you would likely answer, "The calling of the disciples." And you wouldn't be wrong. Here, we find the account, common in the gospels, of Jesus going to the shore of the Sea of Galilee and making that familiar invitation to the fishermen—Peter, Andrew, James, and John: *Follow me, and I will make you fish for people*. These four will be joined by eight more who will make up the core of Jesus' followers. There would be more who accompany

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_Hall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Hall)

Jesus—including a number of women—but these twelve comprised the inner circle, his imperfect but most trusted lieutenants.

The gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus' genealogy. After the genealogy there is the birth story accompanied by the appearance of the magi with their strangely inappropriate gifts. To escape Herod, who showered carnage on Bethlehem, the Holy Family flees to Egypt. After a couple of years, when it seems that the coast is clear, they return to Nazareth. That is what we find in chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 3 opens with the appearance of John the Baptist conducting baptisms in the Judean wilderness and proclaiming to the crowds, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven<sup>2</sup> has come near*. John reluctantly baptizes Jesus and then Jesus is swept away into the wilderness for forty days of fasting and testing.

For the Jews of that day, John the Baptist represented the long line of Old Testament prophets. To them he wore the mantle of Elijah and Isaiah, of Amos and Hosea, and others. He spoke sharp words and offered repentance. He was a link to their righteous past.

Our reading today in chapter 4 picks up with these words, *Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee*. This marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus makes his home in Capernaum—a fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew interprets this move as fulfillment of scripture. In Isaiah 9 (which Matthew quotes here), Isaiah writes of the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the twelve tribes of Israel. The lands these tribes inhabited were in the region of the Sea of Galilee. They were the northern most tribes of Israel. What is significant about these lands is that they had been subject to numerous invasions by foreign armies over the centuries. This included the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Seleucids, and the Romans. The inhabitants of these lands knew too well the meaning of Isaiah's words, *Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali...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*. They would know of the darkness; they would know of the *shadow of death*. Also, and more importantly, Matthew's congregation would know the darkness of living under Roman imperial rule. Yet, Jesus goes to this place proclaiming, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*.

Now, if you are planning to proclaim God's kingdom wouldn't Jerusalem be a better place to start? Galilee, far from the center of the country, with its checkered past, is just too messy. Yet, this is where Jesus goes when he hears that John has

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<sup>2</sup> Speaking of the kingdom of heaven—is there a difference between Matthew's kingdom of heaven and Luke's kingdom of God? No. Scholars suggest that Matthew's gospel, with its strong Jewish pedigree, wishes to avoid invoking the holy name of God. So it substitutes 'heaven' so as not to say the word God.

been arrested. Jesus brings God's light to Galilee to shine in the darkness of Rome's shadow. Into these shadows of oppression Jesus calls his followers to repent, to turn to God's rule.

One theme running through Matthew is how Jesus is the fulfillment of scripture. Fourteen times Matthew incorporates scripture to make this point. John the Baptist, for all the world, appeared like a prophet of old with his camelhair clothes and his message of repentance. Likewise, Jesus' first executive action is a call for repentance.

Repentance, as you know, means to change direction. This is more than simply changing one's values or religious attitudes, it means altering one's identity. The one who repents embraces new relationships and seeks the restoration of existing relationships. The one repenting doesn't just turn to God but returns to creation's original perfect and righteous relationship with God. The call to repent is a call to a new life, a new identity, a new community, a new purpose.

In today's reading, Jesus extends this call to Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Matthew carefully describes the scene for us: Jesus is walking along the lake shore and he spots Peter and Andrew *casting a net into the sea*. Matthew specifically explains that they are doing this *for they were fishermen*. I mean, why else would they be casting a net into the water? Maybe it's laundry day and this is how they get their whites extra bright? Maybe they are dragging the lake looking for pirate treasure? Maybe they are engaged in CrossFit workout—The Net Toss. From personal experience I can tell you that fishing does confuse some people. When I go to the beach, I like to fish. I will be standing waist-deep in the surf with a fishing rod, throwing a lure into the waves and reeling it back in. It is not uncommon for someone to be walking down the beach and ask me, "What are you doing?" So that no one is confused, Matthew takes extra pain to clarify that Peter and Andrew are fishermen. This is their livelihood; it is what they do everyday; it is their identity.

Jesus approaches them and offers them something new—a new career, a new calling, a new identity, a new community, a new purpose. No longer will they be a couple of guys chucking a net into the water, they will be God's agents of change. In the same way, Jesus called James and John, also fishermen, to join him, as well. They accept immediately. Did they know Jesus? Had they met him before? Had they heard his words? We don't know. I like to think that when confronted with the instrument of God's grace and light that their only response is acceptance.

The final verse in our reading tells us that *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*. In his ministry, Jesus demonstrates the promise of the kingdom in his teaching, and preaching, and healing. A new reality is breaking into our world.

This passage is indeed about the call of the disciples and how they will be sent into the world to fish for people and share with them the promise of the kingdom. But this passage is also about a transfer of power—God’s power.

At his first inauguration, George Washington bravely and humbly accepted a new form of power as president of an emerging republic. As he stated in his address to Congress, “I walk on untrodden ground.” The disciples, likewise, were crossing untrodden ground when they accepted Jesus’ call. They believed in the call but had no idea where it would lead them.

God’s power flows out from God to the prophets to John to Jesus to the disciples and ultimately to the world. Possession of God’s power is not a zero sum equation. If I have power and I give some to you, I don’t lose power. It’s like those candles we light on Christmas Eve. We don’t pass one candle around. We take one flame and use it to share light. One becomes hundreds. God’s power extends from person to person.

In this time of transition, just as our government is defining the nation, I believe it is a good time for the church to ask the same question—What do we want the role of the church to be in the world? Is the church going to be—

- a light to the nations?
- a voice for the forgotten?
- an embracer of refugees?
- a source of civil dialogue?
- an advocate of justice?
- a disruptor of poverty?
- a proponent of peace?

Finally, in our church today, we witness another transfer of power. [At the eleven o’clock service/In a few moments] we will ordain and install new officers. These people have been called by God and by you to serve this congregation as ruling elders and as deacons. We will lay hands on those being ordained. In doing so, we will be transferring God’s power, God’s spirit, to them to serve. If you want to know what God’s power looks like, this is it—people answering God’s call and receiving God’s spirit. May we all be God’s holy servants.