



West Denmark Lutheran Church Luck, Wisconsin westdenmark.org

**Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 25, 2026**

**“The Kingdom of God Has Come Near”
*A Sermon by the Rev. Shawn Mai, Interim Pastor***

Matthew 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Grace and peace to you.

As I begin this sermon with these words, I am reminded that Saint Paul brought this same greeting to the people of Corinth during their time of division and disruption. Indeed, these are difficult times. Many of us could not have imagined facing such events that we have witnessed these past weeks in environs that are so close and, for many of us, have been home.

I have heard the fears and anxieties of members of this congregation—afraid to leave their home in fear of what might happen to them. I’ve listened as employees that I’ve worked alongside at Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park share horror stories of what has happened in their

own families and to their co-workers.

I'm not sure how it is for you, but in times like these, finding grounding feels especially important. In these times of social media, division, and fake news, what is truth? What feels true?

What we do have is right now. In this space there is a grounding quality in singing together, coming back to the constancy of the liturgy, and hearing the words of ancient texts.

I want to do three things today: contextualize our current experience; do a brief introduction to the Gospel of Matthew as we continue in this new lectionary year; and say a few words about today's Gospel proclamation, "the Kingdom of God has drawn near." First, a few words about our current human experience.

In the complex tapestry of human existence, we often find ourselves navigating the chasms of conflict and division, reflecting the profound struggles, and differing perspectives that shape our shared reality.

Isaiah 8 highlights the turmoil and strife that arise from a society divided by fear and opposing beliefs, illustrating how mistrust can lead to chaos and suffering. Sound familiar? In 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses the fragmentation within the early church due to differing loyalties and interpretations, reminding us that discord has long been a challenge for communities striving for unity. Sound familiar?

The Gospel of Matthew has Jesus starting his ministry as John the Baptist has been imprisoned and his first words rattling the established religious order and waking the giant that was Roman dominance. Sound familiar?

Each of these times in history aren't end points. They are actually starting points. There is a larger truth that brings us back together every week to wrestle with what's going on "out there" and what is going on "in here."

Second, we start our journey through Matthew.

Today's reading serves as an introduction to what we'll be hearing about throughout the coming year.

The Gospel reading finds Jesus having just come out of his 40 days in the wilderness and the temptations of the devil. Now he starts his formal ministry following the imprisonment of John the Baptist. Jesus has now left Nazareth and chooses to start his ministry in Galilee. He's gone to Capernaum. Galilee itself is home to a diverse population. People are already beginning to come from far and wide to seek Jesus. It seems Jesus was wanting to break away from a "Nazareth first approach"—deliberately seeking a broader good.

What we'll hear throughout Matthew are five distinct speeches by Jesus. These give us a clearer sense of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. There is the Sermon on the Mount, which we'll dive into next Sunday; the Missionary Discourse where Jesus commissions his disciples, the Parables of the Kingdom where, Jesus explains the nature

of the kingdom of God; the Community Discourse, where Jesus speaks to life together as a community; and finally Jesus speaks about the future in his Olivet Discourse. We are beginning our walk through the Gospel where Jesus most directly talks about what it means to be “church.”

Third, I want to talk about a powerful statement Jesus makes as he begins his ministry in today’s Gospel reading.

Jesus says: “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven has drawn near.” There are a couple of things not to miss.

First of all, what does Jesus’ mean by repent? The Greek for repent gives us a deeper understanding of what Jesus is calling us to do. What I’ve heard traditionally is that repent means “turn around.” A deeper sense of “metanoia”—the word in Greek meaning “change your perspective;” “transform your thinking; or even better “wrap your mind around this! Everything is being turned upside down. Think about Mike Miles’ tone of voice. “People, this is going to blow your mind!”

“Repent! The Kingdom of God has come near.” Taking a closer look at the rest of this powerful proclamation, the Greek tense for come near (nyylkev) (eggiken) means “IS near.” It’s not something in the future, it is now. Jesus is pointing our attention to “the now,” not the kingdom of God being a heaven where we’ll go to be with grandma and the family. It is now.

Is Jesus a domestic terrorist saying such things?

Speaking of one who has nicely rattled society, I’ve been thinking about Rob Reiner since his death. One of the great movies he directed was *The Princess Bride*.” One of the characters, Inigo Montoya, spends the movie trying to avenge his father’s death and he is paired for a while with Vizzinni. To Montoya’s dismay Vizzinni says over and over again “inconceivable” (he says it ALL the time) to everything. In a great line Montoya finally says to Vizzinni, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

That has come to mind as I hear Christianity or Religion used today. What is done and said in the name of Christianity in our country is painful. “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means!”

For that reason, this work we do each Sunday becomes more and more important. In perilous times, what does it mean that the Kingdom of God has drawn near? What does “the kingdom of God” even mean, if it is something that is here and now. If I take Jesus’ words and see his words in action, I’d say the kingdom of God is where “Love meets Suffering.”

Let me tell you a couple of stories.

In France, during World War II, there was a church (I won’t even try to say the name because my French is, well, non-existent) led by a pastor and his wife who led their community in saving close to 5000 Jews from the Nazis. The villagers hid Jewish refugees in their homes and set up a system of providing false documentation for the Jews

to escape to Switzerland. Pastor Andre preached nonviolent resistance and tolerance. "Where Love meets Suffering."

Back in the 1970's, a community formed in San Francisco called the Castro, a gay community where thousands of LGBTQAI folk flocked, hungry for a place where they could be open with their love and be their authentic selves. I remember the power of coming over the hill and visiting the Castro for the first time.

In the 1980's this community of love was rattled to its core when the AIDS epidemic rained down on the world. In San Francisco there were approximately 60,000 gay men at the start of the epidemic; 30,000 of them contracted the disease.

A gay friend, who I went through my CPE certification process with, lived in the Castro at that time. I remember him telling me about the powerful ministry that happened in his church. While a cultural norm became fearing touching somebody with AIDS, the pastor would give communion and then place his hands on the shoulders of his ill congregants and let the touch linger. When a new "law and order" governor was elected and cracked down on the use of marijuana, the church, recognizing the use of marijuana was the only way to relieve the suffering of the disease, became a donation spot for marijuana. The church members distributed this singular antidote of suffering to those who requested it. "Where love meets suffering."

Dios Habla Hoy is an immigrant, Spanish speaking church in south Minneapolis. Sergio, a pastor at the church, has led an effort to deliver food to immigrants who are fearful of leaving their homes. Sergio immigrated to the United States from Mexico and described himself in a New York Times article this week as a conservative. When he first heard that ICE was coming to Minneapolis, he was not concerned as agents would only be targeting people with criminal records. As he heard firsthand accounts from community members that ICE's aggressive tactics were indiscriminately reigning down on non-white people he changed his views. The terror unleashed in his congregation drove them to begin an effort delivering food. They've received almost 25,000 requests for food and have delivered 14,000. "Where Love meets Suffering."

There was a request for blankets from the women's shelter across the street from our Parish Hall that came as winter began this year. Immediately, a group of you gathered quilts from the church basement and began a quilting group to make blankets for the shelter. I would imagine this weekend there is much gratitude. "Where Love meets Suffering."

The kingdom of God has drawn near. We are standing on holy ground.

These are times not to be looking out there for grounding. These are times to be looking within. What are the core values and that ground you, that form your perspective, and propel you in some direction?

These are perilous times. As human beings, we absorb the tensions around us, often without awareness. Even if we choose to avoid the news and social media, anxiety and tension permeate the air.

This community is crucial now more than ever. Our gathering in liturgy, coffee hours, sharing peace, song, and simply sitting together in this sacred space helps us regulate our emotions and find our grounding amidst the chaos. That spirit also permeates the air.

On Monday night, the church council had an extensive conversation about what is happening to our neighbors—near and far. Christy, Liz, and I are going to share some additional words from ELCA leadership and talk more specifically about efforts we might support as a congregation for our neighbors in the Twin Cities metro area.

Right now, let us sing! Please join me in the hymn of the day, “Blest Be The Tie That Binds.”

AMEN