

## 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 8:23-9:3
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is my light and my salvation.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom and cured every disease among the people.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 4:12-23

The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time begins our actual journey through the Gospel of Matthew proper. And here we start with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as recorded in the Gospel after his temptations in the desert. So the focus for this Third Sunday of Ordinary Time is going to be on Jesus's ministry in Galilee and his choosing of the twelve apostles. The reading is from Matthew 4:12-23. It's a long reading but it's extremely important so follow along with me. We will read it, we will ask some questions, and then we will use the Old Testament to unpack it. This is a very important text. Matthew 4:12 says this:

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Caper'na-um by the sea, in the territory of Zeb'ulun and Naph'tali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

and here is the quote from Isaiah

"The land of Zeb'ulun and the land of Naph'tali, toward 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 preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 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 fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zeb'edee and John his brother, in the boat with Zeb'edee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.<sup>1</sup>

So there is our Gospel for this Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. There is a lot of important questions to ask about this text. Let's walk through it together. Number one, why does Jesus withdraw into Galilee after John is arrested by Herod? Number two, why does Jesus go and dwell at Capernaum in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali? You can here that this is something that Matthew twice emphasizes. He not only tells you that Jesus dwells in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, he then quotes a prophecy from Isaiah that speaks about these territories. What does this mean? For most of us — lets's be honest — when you read those words Zebulun and Naphtali, do they have any meaning to you whatsoever or do you just blow by them? Okay, the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, lets move on. Well why is Matthew emphasizing it? Who were Zebulun and Naphtali and why is it so important that Jesus start his ministry there and not elsewhere? The third question, why does Jesus then begin to preach about the coming of the kingdom of heaven? What would that have meant in a first century Jewish context? And then finally, fourth, why does Jesus begin to call the twelve apostles? We see here the account of Peter, Andrew, James and John, the first four of the twelve to be called. What is the significance of his calling apostles and what would that have meant in a first century Jewish context? So let's walk through each one of those together.

Number one. After John's arrest Jesus withdraws into Galilee. Why? Why Capernaum? Why Galilee? Well if you think for a minute — it is important keep

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

straight in your mind's eye that — Jerusalem, the capital of Israel and Judea, is in the south. That is the southern territory known as Judah. Galilee is in the northern part of the holy land and that is where Nazareth is. That is where Jesus grew up. So in this case John the Baptist was doing his ministry in the south, in Judea, and that is where he was arrested, executed, and put to death by Herod. So Jesus here goes from the south in Judah (Judea) and up into Galilee, he “withdraws into Galilee.” Why does he go here? Well on the one hand, just on a practical level, Judea is dangerous now. John has just been beheaded as a prophet and Jesus, if he were to begin ministry there, would face some of the similar dangers from the king and from authorities. So it is practically speaking a very wise decision to get out of Judea which is a hotbed for this kind of political turmoil and move into a safer, quieter territory up in the north in Galilee. But that is not why Matthew says Jesus goes up into the land of Galilee. Matthew says that Jesus does it in order to fulfill a prophecy, that he goes to Capernaum, to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that the words of the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled — and then he gives you the quote from Isaiah that I read.

Now for many of us Christians reading in the 21st century, that prophecy doesn't mean that much. But for a first century Jew, this would have been absolutely critical. Why? Well you have to understand the history of Israel. So forgive me, I'm going to do a bit of history here but it's essential for understanding who Jesus is and what he is all about. So for those of you who have the handouts you can follow along. I have given you a little chart on the handout of key moments in the history of Israel. For those of you that don't have the handout, I will try to hit the high points here. So in ancient Jewish history, according to the Bible, around 1000 BC — so a thousand years before Jesus comes onto the scene — God promises King David that his kingdom, which is the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 sons of Jacob and their descendants, that those 12 tribes as a kingdom will last forever. God promises David that in 1000 BC in the book of Samuel, 2 Samuel 7. However, by 922 BC after the death of Solomon, the 12 tribes split into two different kingdoms. The 10 tribes of the north become the kingdom of Israel and then the two tribes in the south become the kingdom of Judah. And these two kingdoms are at war with one another, they are at strife with one another, they are divided from one another, and that's how they continue for a couple hundred years until something absolutely momentous took place. It's sometimes forgotten by Christians, but no Jew would

have forgotten it. In 722 BC — about 700 years before Christ — the Assyrian exile happened.

What was the Assyrian exile? Well the Assyrian Empire at the time — in the eighth century BC — was extremely powerful and they came into the northern part of the holy land and they decimated it and they took those 10 northern tribes, the northern kingdom of Israel, they destroyed them they killed them, and what remained of them they took into exile and they scattered them amongst the pagan peoples of the surrounding world. So this is called the Assyrian exile of the 10 northern tribes. If you want an analogy for this to kind of help you see the significance, imagine if in the early years of the United States when we just had 13 colonies, imagine if 10 of those 13 colonies would've been conquered, say by the French or the English. What would that have done to the United States? It would have decimated the union, it would have been an absolutely devastating defeat, because the majority of the colonies would be destroyed or taken into exile. That is what happened to Israel. In 722 BC in the Assyrian exile, the majority of the people of God, the majority of the sons of Jacob, the tribes of Israel, were wiped off the face of the map. They were driven out of the holy land and they were no more. They had a few remnants here and there, but their tribal land, their tribal territory, was now taken over by pagans. That happened in 722 BC. Now guess what were the first two tribes to go into exile in the Assyrian exile. It was the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. In other words, the territory of Galilee is where that exile began, where the overthrow of the 12 tribes started, and that's where Jesus is going to begin his public ministry. Precisely where the exile began is where Jesus is going to start undoing the effects of the exile. Precisely where the 12 tribes were decimated and broken into pieces and scattered to the four winds is where Jesus is going to begin calling his 12 disciples in order to gather around himself a new Israel and in order to establish a new king. That's why he's doing it. This is very very deliberate on Jesus' part. He knows exactly what he's doing here.

Now let me finish the history — I got ahead of myself there — because that wasn't the only exile that was important. In 587 BC, the remaining two tribes down in the south, Judah and Benjamin, were also taken into exile by the Babylonians. So the Babylonians came a couple hundred years later and they tore down the temple, they burned Jerusalem to the ground, and they took the remaining two tribes into exile in Babylon. So in the sixth century before Christ, it pretty much looked like

all of God's promises were totally broken, that he had failed his people, that the kingdom that he said would last forever didn't even last for 500-600 years, and everything was in ruins. Now some light began to shine in the darkness. About 40 or 50 years after, around 537-538 BC, the king of Persia allowed the two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, to return from exile. He actually gave them money to rebuild the Temple and to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and so that exile came to an end, the Babylonian exile came to an end. But do you know what exile never came to an end? It was the Assyrian exile, it was the northern kingdom. The 10 tribes of the northern kingdom remain scattered and lost among the Gentiles. That's where the legend of the lost tribes of Israel — you may have heard about it — comes from, because by the time you got down to Jesus's day in the first century A.D., although the two tribes from the south had come back from exile, the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom remained lost. They were scattered amongst the gentiles, their descendants had intermingled with the Gentiles and who knows where they were, who knows who they were. They were the lost tribes of Israel.

And so with that in mind, when we go back to the Gospel, what is so powerful about this is that the Assyrian exile of the 10 northern tribes, the lost tribes of Israel, where did it begin? It began in the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali, it began in Galilee. According the book of Kings, 2 Kings 15-17, says that the first tribes to go into exile were Zebulun and Naphtali. So when Jesus begins his public ministry, what does he do? He beelines it for Galilee and for Capernaum because he is going to begin undoing the exile of the 12 tribes by beginning his ministry precisely where the first exile started. He is going to begin gathering around himself the 12 disciples in order to build up a new Israel precisely where the old Israel was devastated, precisely where the old Israel was scattered to the four winds. Now with all that history and mind, listen to the words again:

leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Caper'na-um by the sea, in the territory of Zeb'ulun and Naph'tali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"The land of Zeb'ulun and the land of Naph'tali, toward 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."

And notice — if you have any doubts about what Jesus is doing — what does he begin to preach:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Any first century Jew who would have heard the language of the kingdom would have always known that the kingdom meant all 12 tribes. The kingdom of David was all 12 tribes. The kingdom of Solomon was all 12 tribes. So when Jesus comes proclaiming the kingdom, he means the restoration of Israel, he means the ingathering of the tribes. He doesn't just mean the salvation of the southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, he means the ingathering of the lost tribes of Israel. And if you had any doubt that that's what he meant, look at the last part of the Gospel text. What does he begin doing? Calling the first four of the twelve disciples. So any first century Jew — when they would've seen Jesus with 12 disciples around him that he called the twelve as if they were this unique appointed body of followers — would've recognized that he was making a messianic move, that he was talking about regathering the 12 tribes. But they also would've been able to tell that “that's a nice idea but there's a problem. You know as well as I do that 10 of those 12 tribes have been scattered to the four winds. You know as well as I do that 10 of those 12 tribes are lost among the Gentiles. So how are you going to gather them all back? How are you going to reconstitute the kingdom of David? How are you going to bring about this kingdom?” Well as you'll see as we move through the Gospel, the answer is simple. If you want to get the lost tribes of Israel you have got to go get the Gentiles, because that's where they are, scattered among the nations. So what Jesus is going to do is he is going to begin with the Jews and then move out to the Gentiles and gather around himself a new Israel to fulfill the prophecies of the old covenant. That's what the 12 disciples are all about. You will see this elsewhere in the Gospels — we haven't gotten there yet — but later on in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 19:28 what does Jesus say to the apostles?

“Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Now that is it right there, this is what he's doing at the very beginning of his public ministry. He's gathering the twelve around himself to symbolize that he's going to

gather the twelve tribes. But notice something very important here, he says “in the new world.” He is not talking about going find the lost descendents of the 10 tribes among the Gentiles and then putting them on buses or airplanes or something like that — or even boats and bringing them back to the earthly promised land — he's talking about bringing them to the new promised land of the new creation and of the kingdom, not of this world, but of the kingdom of heaven. Now we will have to see how that plays out as we move through the course of the Gospel. How is Jesus going to gather in the twelve tribes to this heavenly kingdom? We are not there yet but I will give you a hint, it has to do with the Last Supper and with the Eucharist, but we will have to wait until we get to that later. We have about 20 chapters before we get there. So with all of that in mind — I know I kind of went off here but I just wrote a book on this called *Jesus and the Last Supper* where I go through this in a lot of detail and I show how the Last Supper is tied to the ingathering of the lost tribes of Israel.

For now, to get back to the lectionary, you can see a confirmation of what I'm suggesting by going back to the first reading. So what is the first reading that the Church chooses for us for this Sunday in Ordinary Time? Well what a surprise, it is Isaiah 9, it is the very prophecy quoted in the Gospel of Matthew. So Isaiah 8:22 - 9:3:

But there will be no gloom for her that was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zeb'ulun and the land of Naph'tali,

Pause there. What is the former time in which he brought them into contempt? It was the Assyrian exile, that is what Isaiah is talking about. So at the time of the Assyrian exile, he brought the land of Zebulun and Naphtali into contempt, meaning they were brought into exile. Now keep going:

but in the latter time [meaning the future] he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

How will he do this? Keep reading:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy; they rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

Now the lectionary stops there but if you kept going and they just quoted the whole thing you would see just a couple verses later in verse six that you would hear these words...why are they rejoicing?:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore.

So why are Galilee and Naphtali and Zebulun going to be so rejoiceful? Because the Messiah will come, because he is going to restore and reestablish the kingdom of David. But this time it is going to last forever. And that's exactly what Jesus does, he goes to Galilee and he begins preaching, "repent, for the kingdom is at hand." This is exciting stuff. There is just so much interesting stuff and I think that for many of us as Gentile Christians, it just kind of washes over us. We don't hear what is going on. We don't realize that "the hopes and fears of all the years" — as we sing during the Advent hymn — the hopes and fears of all the Jewish people about their future, about what God promised, they're all coming to realization now at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He is already saying exactly everything he needs to show them about who he is and what he's come to accomplish.

The Responsorial Psalm for this week once again bridges the Old and the New Testaments. The theme is "the Lord is my light and my salvation" and it is a whole Psalm about desiring to dwell in the temple of the Lord and to behold his beauty (in verse 4). And then most importantly verse 12 says this:



I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living!

So why is that Psalm chosen? It expresses the desire of the psalmist to be in the promised land. That was what the Jews were waiting, that is what they were hoping for. They were waiting for all of the scattered tribes, the lost tribes, to be brought back to the Temple and to be brought back to the promised land, and that's what Jesus is going to do in the Gospel. He is going to begin gathering the people of Israel, but not to lead them to the earthly promised land, he doesn't gather a big group of disciples and then go to Jerusalem and set up a throne in Jerusalem, his journey to the promised land is going to begin in Jerusalem and end in the heavenly kingdom, and end on his heavenly throne when he ascends on high in his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. And that's what he means by not just the kingdom, but the kingdom of heaven.

Alright, in closing then, what about the Catechism and the living tradition? Just a couple points. If you would like to look into this more you can read — there's a great section — the Catechism paragraphs 551 and 765. In both of those paragraphs the Catechism points out that from the beginning of his public life Jesus chooses the 12 apostles and he gives them a share in his authority in order to direct the Church that he is establishing. He's not just gathering a bunch of followers that have no organization or structure. He's reconstituting Israel. He's establishing an organization, an institution, that's going to endure after his passion, death and resurrection. And as Catechism 765 says, the twelve apostles represent “the twelve tribes of Israel, they are the foundation stones of the new Jerusalem.” And if you have any doubts about this you can just think back a few weeks ago to our Advent hymns. Now think of the most popular Advent hymn we sing, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, and listen to it from a first century Jewish perspective — I'm not going to sing it, I am just going to say the words. So what are the words?

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here,  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

So notice that very famous hymn, although we may have forgotten that Israel was still in exile, that the 10 tribes were still in exile, the author of that famous hymn didn't. They knew, Christians knew, that what the Israelites were waiting for was the end of the exile. They were waiting for the return of the lost tribes. But in Jesus' case, he is going to try and take that hope and transfigure it, to where he gets them, in a sense, to lift up their hearts and realize that "I'm going to bring them back, but I am not going to bring them to the earthly promised land, I am going to begin a journey to the heavenly promised land and the heavenly kingdom."