

***We Choose the Kingdom of God***  
**Commemoration of St. Andrew the Apostle, Matthew 4:18-22**  
**150th Anniversary**  
**Grace Church Newton**  
**November 12, 2023**

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE HOMILY. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

*Give us, who are called by your Holy Word, grace to follow...without delay. Amen. (BCP 237)*

Good morning, Grace! What a day! It is a joy to be here with all of you this morning to celebrate Grace Church's patronal feast day as we commemorate St. Andrew the Apostle...to join in this celebration of 150 years of Grace Church on this site, in this building. Thanks be to God!

Today feels like a day when, rather than trying to describe our faith, our theology, our understanding of God with words...instead, we live it. Our actions and our movement embody our faith today.

- Today we parade joyfully outside the walls of the parish, proclaiming to the community around us that God is, that God is with us, that – even with challenging events in our community and around the world, or perhaps *especially* in light of those challenges – that God is Love, and God is Joy.
- We embody our faith today as we gather for worship here, together.
- Today we will recognize and give thanks for the leadership of those who served on the tower committees these past years, establishing a firm foundation for Grace Church into the future.
- We honor and commission acolytes, those who serve our church today and who will lead the church into the future.
- And in gathering together for the Eucharistic feast, as we stand around this altar to receive the bread and the wine, we are mysteriously united with each other, with those who have gone before, and with those who will come after us as the body of Christ.

Today, more than any words, our movement and our actions preach the good news.

In today's gospel, the apostles also spoke with their movement and their actions. This morning's selection describes the moment when Jesus called his first disciples, Peter and

Andrew, and then James and John, the sons of Zebedee. When Jesus called them to be transformed from those who fish for fish...to those who fish for people, we are told that they “immediately left their nets and followed” Jesus (Matt 4:20, 22).

What these few verses from the fourth chapter of Matthew don't reveal, though, is the nature of the choice the apostles were making. Many commentators, taking a wider view of the whole chapter, see a contrast being drawn between the Roman Empire and the Kingdom of God. Our reading today starts at verse 18. If we scroll back a little earlier in the chapter – say, verse 12 / verse 13... We notice, for example, that Matthew specifies that Jesus' is located in Capernaum. Now, Capernaum was a city in the Land that God had promised to the Jewish patriarchs, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Capernaum was in the land that God showed Moses from the mountaintop before he died. Capernaum was in the territory that Joshua took possession of. This land – in Hebrew scripture – was a gift from God for God's chosen people, yet now it was occupied by Rome.

After Matthew locates Jesus in Capernaum, he then cites the prophet Isaiah as Isaiah the Assyrian Empire and its rule over the northern kingdom. Through this reference, Matthew is drawing a parallel between Assyrian rule over God's people eight centuries earlier with Roman rule over God's people during Jesus' life and in the years following his death. This would have been a fairly natural connection to make. The destructive impact of Roman rule would have been fresh in the minds of the community from which this gospel emerged. Not only was Jesus crucified by Rome, Roman forces had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and had expelled its Jewish inhabitants less than a decade before this gospel was recorded. [See [Source](#) for a discussion of Roman Imperial imagery in Matthew 4.]

Now, to put the last piece in our contextual picture, as soon as Matthew locates Jesus in Capernaum and cites these verses from Isaiah, he writes: “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Matt 4:17).

So the story develops like this:

- First, Matthew describes that Jesus has entered the land that had been promised to his people by God, land that is now occupied by a violent, oppressive, imperial regime.
- Secondly, the earlier Assyrian regime, also interlopers in the land of Israel, is remembered, deepening the imperial reference.
- And then Jesus says, “something is about to change. A new kingdom is coming.”

And do you know what happens in the very next verse? In the very next verse, we arrive at today's reading. In the very next verse, Jesus calls his first disciples. Jesus is saying, “make a choice.” You must choose – the Roman Empire, this force of oppression and violence

against your people, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Do you choose Rome? Or do you choose the coming reign of God? And they drop everything. And they follow. Immediately. They chose their side.

This gospel is about Jesus choosing his disciples. It is also about his disciples choosing a side. We, too, face that choice every day. Do we choose the reign of God? Do we choose justice, and peace, and love of God and love of neighbor? And what does that choice look like today? What nets are we called to drop? Which direction is Jesus walking in and beckoning us to follow? What good news are we being called to proclaim?

I'm new here, so what do I know, really. Everything here is new to me. But as I pray / and listen / and sense the energy of this community, it does seem that we are poised for a new era here at Grace Church. **Over the last six weeks** you have called an entirely new staff and clergy leadership to this community. **Less than four weeks ago**, we gathered to give thanks for the completed reconstruction of the bell tower – the culmination of years of sacrifice and effort and hard, hard work toward consensus. **And today** we celebrate 150 years of Grace Church's presence on this site. As we mark this milestone, today we officially close the previous chapter by honoring and giving thanks for the work of the Tower Committees, those who led the creation of a solid foundation for the future. And today we commission acolytes who will lead our worship now and who will lead our church into the future.

On this day, as we close one chapter and as God calls us forward, what will be our choice? What will it mean to choose the Kingdom of God? We don't yet know what that looks like for Grace. We do know that we build on a strong foundation. We know we won't always start out in agreement, but we trust that we can get there. We know that the opinion of each of us is essential as together we work to discern God's call to the future.

I invite you to join me in praying that God will open our hearts to each other and to the Spirit; that God will open our imaginations to how the Gospel can be lived by Grace Church today and into tomorrow. That is our work. Here. Together. Listening for the voice of God and the tug of the Spirit inviting us to make a choice.

We choose the kingdom of God. Thanks be to God.

Amen.