A Change, A Change, A Change

Living God, help us so to hear your Word that we may

truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe;

and believing, we may follow your way in all faithfulness,

seeking your honor and glory in all that we do. Amen.”

 It was only 40 days ago give or take some traveling time. It was only 40 days ago that Jesus stood in the river Jordan, convincing John to baptize him. It was only 40 days ago, give or take some traveling time, that the heavens were opened and Jesus heard a voice saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased. It was only 40 days ago give or take some traveling time.

 40 days ago, John was calling for crowds to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” There were crowds flocking to John. Even the Sadducees and Pharisees were coming him to be baptized. John’s disciples were sitting at his feet listening to his every word. 40 days ago John was at the height of his ministry and he had seen the promise fulfilled. He had baptized the one for whom he was called to prepare the way.

 And now 40 days or so later, give or take some traveling time. Jesus returns from the wilderness to changes. It’s like the grown folk used to say about us kids playing in the house. Inevitably something would break, someone would get hurt or a fight would break out and they’d say with exasperation, “I turn my back for one minute…!” Followed by, “Y’all testing my nerves putting me through all these changes!”

 Jesus had already been through all kinds of changes out there in the wilderness fasting, temptation, angels that come to serve him. Jesus returns from the wilderness changed ready to embark on his public ministry and wouldn’t you know it, things have changed while he was gone. Jesus turns his back for one minute and John gets arrested. I don’t think it was the angels who told him. More likely it was someone in Nazareth. Maybe it was his mother Mary. Surely she had heard the whispers around town, “They say that John made a big deal out of baptizing Jesus. He better what himself when he comes back from where ever he is.” Mother Mary may have warned Jesus, “Baby, you may be next.”

 I used to think that Jesus was formed in the wilderness, that he came back ready to do business. But it’s not that cut and dry. How many milestones have we claimed, celebrated by rites of passages, and then expected things to go as we’ve planned? We’ve done the work, we’ve put in our time, we’ve moved past our “growing edges” and are now prepared to take life by the reins and make good things happen. And then, just like that, **A Change of Plans.**

 I remember the morning I was to graduate from college. I was so excited. Four long years I had put in. Four long years I had invested in my future. This degree was supposed to somehow magically move me from being poor to middle class. I was prepared to go get mine. And then the phone rang. It was my godmother. She was so proud of her baby and couldn’t wait until after the ceremony to tell me. As I sat on the other end of the receiver glowing and graciously accepting her compliments and good wishes she asked me a question that forever changed my life. With her double edged sweetness and cutting realism she asked, “And so how do you plan to give back?” I was floored. That was not a part of my plan. And frankly, I was angry that she would ruin my day like that. I mean, c’mon I was about to graduate from a good school, the first in my family to graduate college, and you want me to think of others now. Can’t a brother have a few years to get settled? But she continued, “You know, baby, we’ve made a lot of sacrifices so that you can be where you are today. Now that you got yours, it’s your turn to give back.” As I listened to her speak I realized that I had I needed a change of plans.

 You see four years of college is like being in the wilderness. It is a time of formation, of molding, of getting ready to make your mark. But what I found out that day is that God is forever forming, forever molding, forever making us. The headings in our bibles give us the impression that the story of Jesus flows. Matthew 4:1 *The Temptation of Jesus*, Matthew 4:12 *The beginning of Jesus Ministry in Galilee*. But what one of the things our text is telling us is that Jesus formation isn’t over yet. What if Jesus formation is a constant part of his story? Hold on to that for a moment and think about the implications that might have for us.

 We are products of a world that demands return upon investment. If we invest what we reap is ours to do with what we will. That may seem true for money, education, and our work life, our relationships, even our home. But if we take look back over our lives, how many times has there been a change in plans? Stock market drops—401k is diminished. Your degree isn’t enough for that promotion. And I’m sure none of us has had a breakup with a loved one. And what about unexpected rent hike?

What Jesus learned out there in the wilderness prepared him for what was to come. That’s really what formation is all about; it prepares us to handle the unexpected. But the unexpected need not throw us for a loop. I don’t know about you but I believe in a God that knows how to knock the wind out of unexpected. I’m not saying that the unexpected doesn’t bring heartache and trials; I’m not saying it doesn’t bring sickness and sadness. But what I am saying is that in the times of unexpected, when there is a change of plans we can pray, “Have thine own way Lord, have thine own way. Thou are the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me after thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still.” When we yield to God’s molding then we can handle a change of plans.

 Jesus yields to this change of plans now doesn’t he? Jesus withdraws to Galilee, but this time he does not withdraw to recharge. No this time Jesus withdraws to come out. He comes out to a people as a fulfillment of prophecy. He comes out with **A Change of Message**. The words of Isaiah quoted in verses 14 and 15 of Matthew 4 are no longer spoken as a promise to come. They are now spoken as promise kept. Jesus has come to bring light to those who sat in the region and shadow of death. Ohhh but there is something I love about how darkness is categorized in this part of the text. “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.” I used to hear this and only see the suffering of the people who sat in darkness. But this time around I heard one word that changed darkness to a place of hope. That three-letter word “sat”, people who sat in darkness.

 Although the phrase sat in darkness means to live, reside in darkness—a place of religious and moral darkness, it got me to thinking about what God can do in the darkness. I don’t know if you remember but God used to hang out in the darkness. Way back, a long time ago ‘God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.’ When God hangs out in darkness something powerful happens; creation. So you see these people who sat in darkness, they sat in a place where God was ready to do a new thing. It is often in the darkness where we allow ourselves to be formed by God. And it is this great light that allows us to see the new creation. That’s what it means when we sing Jesus the light of the world. Our life in Christ is the dawn of new creation for you have sat in the darkness and now you are a new creature. How beautiful you are in the light of day!

 And so Jesus proclaims, “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near”. They are the same words John used but now the message has changed. A biblical scholar, J. Glentworth Butler has noted that in this proclamation there is no longer the sorrow or regret contained in the word repent. It is simply a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of life—here it is no longer a state of contrition. That word, that Greek word metanoia means all those things. But it also means to turn around. Our boy John preached repentance for a kingdom that was coming, Jesus *proclaims* repentance for a new thing that has just begun.

 So it stands to reason, that if we have been sitting in darkness. And we are a new creation in Christ, doing a new thing with a change of heart, mind and our lives. Jesus the light of the world shines on us and we should turn around see one another, bask in the glory of God’s creation. Turn to one another and see how beautiful we are. For we are basking in the light of Christ and oh what a beautiful sight to see!

 We know that God’s plan is not our plan and is **A Change of Plans**, well at least for us. We know that Jesus brought us **A Change of Message**. Now it is time to respond to the change the Holy Spirit has in mind for us, **A Change of Calling**.

 Jesus, in his new home of Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee, goes about shining this light to those who sat in darkness. Goes for a walk down by the water. He’s got a new set of plans and a new message to proclaim. He’s in that almost but not yet place. The ministry is defined and outlined but not yet refined. That’s a wondrous place to be wondering what comes next. Oh it can be a bit daunting to think what may be down the beach a ways, but it can be exciting nonetheless. It should sound familiar to you. Its kind of what it can feel like when you are searching for a new pastor. You’ve accepted the change of plans, you are looking at how your message changes and grows and then you will be calling someone as pastor. But that’s another sermon . . .

 We left Jesus walking on the beach. And all of a sudden it becomes clear as day. Like a Fortune 500 headhunter, Jesus spots some folks who are in need of a new job. Simon Peter and Andrew, two brothers, fishermen casting their nets into the sea. And in one sentence Jesus changes their plans, with his new message, ‘Follow me and I will make you fishers of women, fishers of men, fishers of the older, fishers of the young I will make you fish for all people.’ The simplicity of the statement belies its intensity. In these few words Jesus simply offers more than a proposition for a profession change. He offers them a change of calling. For in these words the message to Andrew and Simon are clear. Come learn from me and I will appoint you to a special office, I will *purpose* you with fishing for people. Isn’t that something? Matthew actually writes the intention of being given a new purpose for life with that one word translated as “make”.

 A noble profession, fishing, it is hard, honest work. But in system of unfair taxes, diminished supply because of overuse, I can see how one might start to question just what is one’s purpose in life. I can see how you might find yourself sitting in darkness, waiting for an answer. And then a man named Jesus walks into your life and tells you, I have a purpose for you. It’s a noble thing I’m asking you to do, it’s hard, honest work. When *we* are faced with a change in calling in our lives we often take so much time weighing the pros and cons. Some of us put it off, some of us find ourselves thirty years later with the calling staring us straight in the eye asking, “Are you ready, now?” But even that’s not such a bad thing. Because when your change comes, it comes and it will find you ready.

 The text tells us that Andrew, Peter, James and John all *immediately* left their nets and boats to follow Jesus. A change, a change, a change oh my—what happens when your change comes. Like Andrew, Simon, James and John you make a decision to follow. It’s not like following the latest Twitter feed. It’s not like following the latest celebrity headline. It’s not like following the latest diets or trends. If you decide to follow Jesus in the steps of Andrew, Simon, James and John, you do so with the understanding that following involves personal commitment, personal cost. But isn’t that what it takes to bring God’s realm here—now? Isn’t that what it takes to bring God’s kingdom as God’s kindom, a family that shares God’s blessings? When we follow, acknowledging the commitment, acknowledging the cost—we come alive with the light of Christ and are able to do all things through Jesus because it is Christ who will strengthen us.

 But here is one thing I want to make very clear. We follow Christ, love our neighbors, do unto others as we would have them do unto us, feed our brothers and sisters, pray for those in need, visit the sick, be there for the imprisoned, fight to end poverty, sex trafficking, injustice on all fronts not because it is what the world needs. Howard Thurman reminds us, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

 “A change, a change has come over me. He changed my life and now I’m free.” Those are the words that Walter Hawkins uses to introduce the song “Changed”. I thought about that song this week as I read this text. Because something happens when you make a change. It may seem obvious but when you change, you are not the same as you used to be anymore. The world is somehow clearer, crisper, more vibrant. When Traimaine Hawkins begins to sing the song, “Changed” something happens. She sings, “A change, a change has come over me. He changed my life and now I’m free. A wonderful change has come over me. He changed my walk, he changed my talk, changed my life, he even changed my soul. He changed my life complete and now I sit at the Savior’s feet. To do what must be done, I’ll work and work until he comes.”

I was a child when I first heard the song and I revisit the song often. It brings tears of joy to my eyes and fills my heart. Because when I think of God’s goodness and all that has been done for me, I just have to Thank God for the *change in my plans*. Thank God for *the Change in my message*. Thank God for the *Change in my calling*. In Matthew Jesus is constantly teaching, proclaiming, and healing to provide restoration.

This morning ask yourself, “Have I decided to follow Jesus?” The road may not be easy. But this I know when you can truly sing, “I have decided to follow Jesus”, you have signed up for a change, a change, a change. You will find yourself wanting to teach others how free your change makes you when you change your plans. You will proclaim with your changed talk, your changed walk, from deep down in your changed soul you will proclaim how wonderful it is to work on the side of justice, mercy and love. You will move in the world with a new power, with a light shining on the beautiful you because you have a change of calling. You have been *purposed* by Christ to do a new thing and the Holy Spirit will guide you in your gifts. You are no longer dead in the world but alive. Alive to the possibilities of how our lives can change. Be careful though, when you sing I have decided to follow Jesus, there is no turning back. There is no turning back as you march forward and see with new eyes. You will look to the left and shout with joy, “A change!” You will look to the right and exclaim, “A change!” You will look before you and cry, “A change!” For with Christ all things are new. A change, a change, a change—my Lord ain’t that good news!