

January 22, 2023  
Isaiah 9:1-4  
Matthew 4:12-23

Follow Me

The humanitarian group, Oxfam, released a study about poverty this week. They did it to coincide with the meeting of rich and powerful at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Their report calls attention to the fact that the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. In recent years, the top 1% have taken in nearly 2/3 of all new wealth created. And things will not improve if things keep going this way. Not with climate change and the famines that follow and the increased violence over water rights and energy. Things can't keep going the way they are. They have to change.

So many are struggling. So much of the world is in darkness. War and oppression and terror. Addiction. Gangs and human trafficking. Human lives are bought cheap. It's like the yoke that normally goes on oxen to pull a plow or wagon has been put onto the poor. And they have been loaded down with all the problems of the world. They have no respect or dignity. The people at the bottom, the laborers, the migrants, the underprivileged and impoverished, for them, the world is dark.

The prophet Isaiah addresses this today. It is the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE and his people, the people of Israel are the ones on the bottom. They have been conquered by their neighbors the Assyrians. And they are forced to endure their soldiers and governors and their exorbitant taxes. The people of Israel are underdogs in a world of great and mighty empires. They always have been. They have always been small. They have always been in danger of being captured and enslaved. Maybe you know what that's like. Maybe you know how it is to feel defenseless against the great powers and influences of the world. That you have to carry unfair burdens. That you are stuck, that you are lost and alone and no one sees you, no one cares; least of all God. Isaiah's words are for you and for the people at the bottom, buried under everything. Listen, the yoke across your shoulders will be broken. The rod and the whip of their oppressor will be broken. Light will shine in the darkness. Instead of hunger, there will be plenty. Instead of despair, joy. Instead of slavery, there will be freedom.

Things are going to change. They have to change. The world can't go on like this. God's people can't go on like this. Stuck under one oppressor

or another. The Assyrians, the Medes, the Babylonians, the Greeks. It was the Romans in Jesus' time. Like every empire before, they came and took things: grain, livestock, land, taxes. They installed their governors and army garrisons and put up temples and statues of the emperor. Rome was in charge and everyone knew it. Even way up there in Galilee. With its farmers and shepherds and fishermen. Where most people were struggling to survive. Jesus grew up here, feeling the burden that has poor neighbors had to carry, and the yoke that the mighty and powerful placed on them. In Galilee, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. This is Jesus' home. And this is where Isaiah promises that oppression will end. In the dark, the light will appear. In the gloom, the light will shine. The oppression and misery they bear will be broken.

Jesus is in Galilee because of his own darkness and despair. He is there because John has been arrested. John the Baptist, who said things couldn't keep going the way they were; they had to change. He called people to repent, for the Kingdom of heaven was at hand. Jesus believed him. He was baptized by him. The Spirit descended on Jesus and John confirmed it. He was the one to come after him, to take the work

forward. To bring the kingdom of God into the world to confront all the OTHER kingdoms out there. And how do you think the other kingdoms took that news? Not well. They arrested John. And after Jesus got back from the wilderness, he retreated to Galilee. But the light has to shine. And soon Jesus is picking up where John the Baptist has left off. Announcing to every kingdom out there that the kingdom of God is on its way.

This is good news for those at the bottom. Those without power or privilege. Those who forced to pay the cost of the costly empires. The laborers and fishermen and farmers. The ones pulling the plows and casting nets and cooking meals and caring for children. The ones struggling to hold everything together. The ones closest to the earth and the air and the water and feel its pollution and destruction most. They know things can't go on like this. They have to change. What they need is a new kingdom that offers everyone life and joy.

Prophets see the truth. Prophets like Isaiah. Prophets like Jesus. They know things have to change. That God wants things to change. We have to repent. We have to reorganize things by God's rules. So instead of

darkness there will be light. Instead of yokes and burdens, freedom for the least and last. In God's kingdoms the rods and the bars across people's shoulders will be broken. No one will carry an unfair burden. No one will be treated like a farm animal. No one will have to carry the world on their back.

This past Monday, we celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's birthday. At our community worship service, the churches prayed together and sang together and listened to words from Dr. King. He condemned racism and called for justice. And like a prophet, he called out systems that oppressed people. The empires of America that depended on inequality and low wage labor. That used intimidation and fear-mongering to keep people in their place and the yokes on their shoulders. Dr. King denounced the unfair burdens put on black people. And people in power didn't like it. They said he was a threat to their kingdoms. He was immoral and godless. He was a communist, a fiend, a monster, stirring up the poor and uneducated. Before everyone loved Dr. King, everyone hated him. Because he announced that things needed to change.

The kingdoms of this world put heavy yokes on people. They oppress. They encumber. They pile the burdens on others while carrying none themselves. And prophets announce that things can't go on like this. God's kingdom is coming and it's different than the kingdoms of the world. Justice and mercy are first. The last are first. The least are first. Everything will be flipped around. The light will shine for those sitting in darkness.

Jesus knows things can't stay the same. And on the shores of Galilee, he finds his people. He finds others who want to break yokes and remove burdens. Fishermen, who know what it's like to be at the bottom. Who bear the weight of the Roman empire. And the weight of family and society and religious expectations. These people are nobodies next to kings and emperors. But to Jesus these people are somebodies. Because of what they do every day. Carrying their load. Faithfully. Doing the dirty work, the hard work. Fishing and fixing their boats and cleaning their nets and supporting their families. Every day it's the same. But the Kingdom of God is near to them. God's presence. God's purpose. It is

with them and in them. They don't have to carry the weight of the world anymore.

Come and follow me, Jesus says. To Peter, Andrew, James and John.

Fishermen. Nobodies. People at the bottom. People sitting in the darkness. Jesus calls them and immediately they go. His message is so prophetic. It is so freeing. It breaks the yoke of their burdens and the rods of their oppression. When Jesus calls them, something happens.

They know things have to be different and Jesus brings the change that the world needs. They can't wait to follow and see all those like them set free.

Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven has come near. And he calls us to come follow him. To seek God's kingdom. Not the kingdom of power. Or the kingdom of fame or fortune. Or our own kingdom of control and self-preservation. Follow Jesus into the kingdom of God where the darkness is banished. Burdens are lifted. And heavy yokes are removed. The oppression of the ones carrying everyone else is done.

All we need to do to come and follow is come and follow. Come, show up. Come be available. Come as you are with whatever you have. The

fishermen didn't have much. They didn't have certificates to follow Jesus. Or years of training to followed Jesus. They just did it. Because they were fishermen, and they knew that sometimes you just have to jump in. You have to do it to learn it. They know that boats don't fish themselves. They have to be there. They have to work. They have to keep their equipment in repair. And keep going out day after day after day. Peter, Andrew, James and John are fishermen, and they know how to be patient. How to be persistent. How to be optimistic. They know how daunting the world can be. How easy it is to give up hope. But fishermen don't quit. And if Jesus wants them, then that's what he'll get. Jesus wants you, Janice, Barby and John. Jesus has called you to come and follow him. To come proclaim that this kingdom of heaven is near. To show that things need to change, and they can be different. And you are here because of your optimism. Your persistence. Your dedication. Because you seek the kingdom of God, not the kingdoms of the world. Because you want to break the yoke of oppression on others. You want to remove the burdens the weigh people down. You want to preserve



God's earth from brutal degradation. You want the least to be the greatest and the last to be first.

As you follow Jesus, you will help us follow. You will help us leave behind what we need to leave behind. Just like the disciples. We will need to let go of who we were. And what we thought life would be. Like Andrew, Peter, James and John leaving their boats and their families, we too will have to leave something behind for the sake of something bigger and better. For the sake of Jesus for the sake of the world, for the sake of love, for the sake of others living in the dark, things have to change. We have to change. And turn. And let things be different. And follow Jesus into a kingdom of light and joy and freedom.