

***Isaiah 9:1-4***  
***Matthew 4:12-23***

***word count: 2,036***

Isaiah is writing in dark days of war, a long drawn out spectacle of battle after battle with Assyria, which we know of today as Iraq. It appears to be an endless war, and Isaiah writes poetically of a time that will come when war will be no more. He says, “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall rest upon his shoulders. And his name shall be called, Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

After war will finally end, a new way shall begin. He says, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.” It is a vision of a new way and a new time when nation will not fight against nation, the warring ways that call up our psalms of lament from the Bible, or songs of lament such as we have heard today that express the same sense of sadness. A day will come, says the prophet, when our people will not be divided, and we will not have to mourn for fallen comrades. It is a vision of a new approach to living our lives, a vision kept alive in our own expression of our faith story, and yet still unrealized.

Jesus goes down to the land Isaiah speaks of, where, as Matthew records, “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 proclaim, ‘Repent, for the realm of heaven has come near.’” Stop. Turn around. Look at what you are doing...and change.

Matthew also writes: “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 fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the realm of God and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

In the midst of wars and rumors of wars, of sickness and of mourning those who had fallen, Jesus came to bring a new way; to speak of a vision so radically different than the ways of the Herods and the Caesars of this world that people dropped their nets; dropped their livelihoods and everything they were doing and followed him.

The first to follow were brothers, Peter and Andrew, the fishermen.

In October, Carl and I were in Italy, and Peter’s resting place is perhaps the most prominent of any follower of Jesus—his bones are far beneath the altar at the Vatican.

I am skeptical of holy relics, and have never been terribly moved by them. There are no doubt enough pieces of the One True Cross out there to build a new beige subdivision in Woodbridge.

We saw where St. Mark is buried in St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice. When the first church burned down with Mark in it, his skeleton apparently had the good sense to hide inside a marble column, choosing to pop out just when everyone was praying together for him to reappear in order to rebury him in the new Basilica, where “his bones rest today.”

In fact, the churches of Italy are so full of relics of disciples and saints, that you get the feeling you are on a quest to “collect the whole set.” So, I was wary when we got to Amalfi. With a little fact checking, I learned that the bones of Andrew the fisherman that are not in Scotland or Greece are indeed buried beneath the altar at the Cathedral of Amalfi, and that on special days, the occipital bone of his skull is brought out in a reliquary case and set upon the altar.

We climbed the multitude of stairs up to the baroque façade of this old Romanesque church, and found our way downstairs, where at least parts of Andrew have rested since 1208. I was not prepared for what I saw. An old priest was lecturing to a group of more than twenty people who appeared to be frozen in front of the altar. Seated in a chair to the side was a man who was transfixed by what was on the altar, placing his hands on either side of his face. When he saw us, he stood up and walked over and told us reverently in Italian what was on the altar, and then sat down again and resumed his trance.

In a crystal case, the skull of Andrew rested, looking out. It is ancient, small and frail; a diminutive man. Walking up to it, we took in the dimensions of his face, and I noticed that I could see through the eyeholes out into the room. This was when the power of religious relics hit me. I was seeing through this broken vessel belonging to Andrew that, with his brother Peter, were the first to see and hear Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, and what Andrew saw and heard that day was Jesus saying, “Follow Me.”

For centuries we have been trying to do just that, though none of us have been able to see through those particular eyes and take in a figure so different than any we have ever seen, whose vision of a new way was so compelling that we would drop our nets, our livelihoods, our everything and everyone, and follow him. What kind of presence and power could inspire such a decision to stop what you are doing and change your life?

When Andrew, Peter, James and John dropped their nets and made the decision to be followers of Jesus, we hear from Matthew that, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the realm of God and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

Following Jesus, they proclaimed the good news in a dangerous time, when Herod’s puppet-priests were in collusion with government in order to be on the “inside.” Following Jesus, they healed and gave hope, and Andrew the fisherman saw through his own eyes and heard through his own ears the man he followed, when he said that “the meek shall inherit the earth,” “blessed are the peacemakers,” and “Follow me”; and many did, watching him ride into Jerusalem like a parody of a king on a donkey, at a time when Caesars were taking more power than was granted them by the Republic.

Looking through the holes in that skull where there had once been the sight and sounds of the day of a man known as Andrew, the word, “vision” now means more to me in terms of my faith.

What is our vision of what it means to follow Christ today in these times that bear some similarities to his own?

On this day we set apart to meet to discuss the business of the church, I suggest that we take the time to stop, turn around, and look at where we are. I am thankful to our leadership for taking such care in preparing our budgets and reports, and it is good to stop and look at the past year. It is more important, however, to look to the future. Church Systems writer David Ray once said, “A church that knows who it is and why it exists, will find the means to be the church God is calling it to be.” What role will we take as a church in this community, whom will we serve, and how will we follow the teachings of Jesus?

It is important that our churches be courageous and creative, not sanctuaries for frightened Americans, which is to say recruiting grounds for authoritarian figures or movements. Poet Robert Frost once said, “There’s nothing I’m afraid of like scared people.” We are a people, myself

included, who have been thrown off balance by the events of the beginning of this century and it is time to get things right and balanced again in our thinking.

Our idea of what it means to be part of a faith community is shifting in our country, as challenging times threaten and even frighten many in the changes we see with regard to our sense of safety and security in a new global community where the world has grown so much smaller and more dangerous. Bill Coffin once said, “Many of us have a strong allergic reaction to change of any kind. The result is an intolerance for nonconforming ideas that runs like a dark streak through human history. In religious history this intolerance becomes particularly vicious when believers divide the world into the godly and the ungodly; for then, hating the ungodly is not a moral lapse but rather an obligation, part of the job description of being a true believer.”<sup>1</sup>

In the 15th century, Pope Pius II lifted up the same skull belonging to Andrew, the repository of the words and deeds of Christ, and held it up to a crowd from the steps of St. Peter’s in a ghoulish attempt to drum up support for a crusade against the Turks. What Andrew would have seen that day, had he been able, was how a symbol of faith can be turned against itself when it is used as a blunt instrument rather than a revelation of truth that points to something higher.

Today, religious leaders are once again being approached to speak out against Islam (I was approached about this last week and had a video sent to me). Further, it is an arrogant assumption on the part of many that our clergy and our churches can be counted upon to support a status-quo that excludes glbt people and the leadership of women.

Our symbols have such tremendous power—it is crucial that we remember that their source is in an itinerant preacher and healer who came with knowledge of the realm of God and who called us to follow and be servant leaders to the world, and the world today includes every kind of person.

And that is who we are. In addition, I think that is why we exist as a church—to be followers of a better way who bring a unique, inclusive and loving witness to our community.

In the midst of wars and rumors of wars, of sickness and of mourning those who had fallen, Jesus came to bring a new way; to speak of a vision so radically different than the ways of the Herods and the Caesars of this world that people dropped their nets; dropped their livelihoods and everything they were doing and followed him.

Through the eyes of Andrew, he saw one day a man walking by the lakeshore who said, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Looking ahead, our vision might be to get the word out and build a growing community right here that reaches out and does just that—offering an alternative to fear-based and legalistic religion, in whatever form it takes, and following in the ways of the healer and teacher, bringing the good news of a better way with us. Andrew, Peter, James and John were casting out their nets for fish on a day like today when the greatest evils of humanity were and still are due to a lack of love. The catch they were after turned out to be the fact that Andrew and the rest of them were caught up even as we are, in the net of Christ’s love. Amen.

***Sermon Resources:***

1. William Sloane Coffin, “Credo” (Westminster John Knox Press) 2004 p. 146

## Scripture for Sunday, January 27, 2008

### Isaiah 9:1-4

**1** But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. **2** The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. **3** You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. **4** For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. **5** For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. **6** For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

### Matthew 4:12-23

**12** Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. **13** He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, **14** so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: **15** "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— **16** 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." **17** From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

**18** 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. **19** And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." **20** Immediately they left their nets and followed him. **21** As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. **22** Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. **23** Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people