

WITH WHOM WILL YOU ALLY?**MATTHEW 4:12 – 23***by Elaine Poproski*

To begin today, we need to spend a bit of time with ancient Israel's history and geography. I've included some notes in your bulletin in an attempt to help keep things straight.

Abraham is the beginning of Israel. It was to him that God promised descendants as numerous as the grains of sand on a beach. It was to him that God promised a land flowing with milk and honey – the Promised Land.

Abraham's son, Isaac, inherited God's promises, as did Isaac's son, Jacob.

Jacob had 12 sons. Their descendants eventually became, 4 or 5 hundred years later, the 12 tribes of Israel. Those 12 tribes followed a man named Joshua into the Promised Land, where, over the course of the next couple hundred years, Abraham's descendants finally claimed their long-awaited promise.

The land they conquered was divided amongst the tribes. (They'd actually decided how it was going to be divided before they even stepped foot into the promised land.) Have a look at the map I included in your bulletin to see those divisions. Can you find Naphtali up at the top of the map? And then Zebulun is immediately below it?



And then Zebulun is immediately below it?

The whole reason I'm bringing this up is because Matthew references Scripture that references these tribes and this land.

A few hundred years after the tribes invaded, they had a king named David. King David masterfully united all the tribes into one kingdom – the Kingdom of Israel. It was a golden age that kept getting more and more golden, especially under David's son, Solomon, who became the next king and reigned for a long time.

But eventually, Solomon died. And when Solomon died, that united empire split in two.

What happened was that the tribes from the north split apart from the tribes in the south, which were mostly Judah and Benjamin. One thing to note is that the tribe of Simeon is right in the middle of Judah. That tribe was partially absorbed into Judah, but a lot of that tribe moved north and joined the other tribes there.

When this division happened, the group in the north had their own king and kept the name Israel for their nation. The southern kingdom also had their own king, and their nation became Judah. And so, for a long time, these two kingdoms lived side-by-side as different nations with different kings. There were a lot of wars – a lot of violence. It's a complicated history.



200 years after this split, the Assyrians were the most powerful people of the whole middle eastern region. Their empire was massive and growing. Eventually, Egypt would be under Assyrian control. The empire would extend across the northern shores of the Mediterranean reaching half way through modern-day Turkey and as far north as modern-day Armenia.

The Assyrians were masters of moving into a place, conquering it, deporting the people and spreading them throughout the empire so they would assimilate to the empire, so that the nations that had been conquered, would no longer even exist.

In 722 BC the Assyrians conquered Israel. It didn't happen all at once. It didn't happen in just a year. There were a lot of pieces that resulted in the Assyrians conquering Israel. They deported Israel's people across the empire, assimilating them so completely that we now talk of the 10 lost tribes of Israel. Those ten tribes that made up Israel ceased to exist from the moment the Assyrians conquered and deported them.

Meanwhile, Judah was spared for a time. But they were only spared because the king of Judah paid tribute to Assyria and became one of many vassal states, indebted to and dependent on Assyria's goodwill. But when a new king rose up in Judah – his name was Hezekiah – the peace was no more. The new king revolted against Assyria and ended up losing everything except Jerusalem. And Jerusalem was only spared because the king stripped the royal treasury and the temple to give all the riches to Assyria.

In all of this, Isaiah was God's prophet, crying out for God's people to return to him – to trust him. But they didn't. And Assyria's conquest was the result. And yet, Isaiah had hope. When you read the book of Isaiah, you see that he's lamenting and pleading with the people to turn back to God; he's warning them of the consequences of all the ways they're not acting like God's people, but he always had hope. In Isaiah 9 we read this:

¹ Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past [God] humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali [a.k.a. Israel], but in the future he will honour Galilee [Galilee, of course, being the region that Zebulun and Naphtali were in] of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan –

- ² The people walking in darkness
 have seen a great light;
 on those living in the land of deep darkness
 a light has dawned.

This is the history. I hope I haven't lost you; it's really important to understand how all of this ties together. Sometimes we read Scripture and we come across something we don't understand so we just move on. But Matthew wants us to understand the history. There's a reason he quotes from Isaiah 9. There's a reason he brings up those tribes. It's like he's saying, "We who are here now are rooted in this history. There are things from that history that apply to us today; there were promises made that still apply to us.

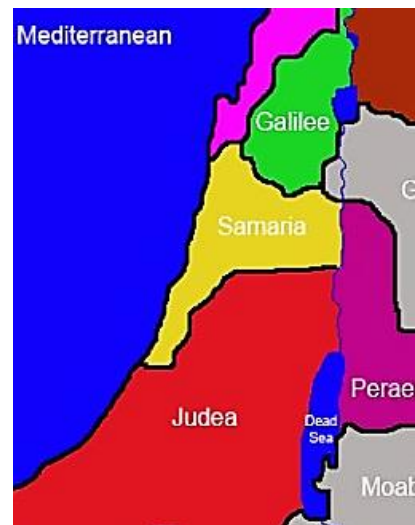
So listen again to Matthew 4, beginning at verse 12:

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth [which was at the southern edge of Galilee] and made his home in Capernaum by the sea [which was at the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee], 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."

When Matthew's audience heard these words from Isaiah, they recognized their history. They knew the violence and despair, the loss and the darkness of those days gone by. Even though that history with Assyria was already very old – it's like when we talk about things from 1300s – it's a history that resonated with their present. These were people living under an often oppressive Roman regime. They'd likely witnessed the desecration and destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. They lived, much like the people of Judah had lived so long ago, in the midst of political instability, uncertain about their own futures.

So Matthew points to Jesus of Galilee. It's not a simple aside. It's not just about locating Jesus on a map. It's so much more than that. God, through Isaiah, promised that he would honour Galilee of the nations – Matthew calls it Galilee of the gentiles. He promised that the people who walked in darkness would see light; that those who sit in the region and shadow of death, on them light would dawn.



After Jesus was baptized, he went into the wilderness for 40 days. He was probably somewhere around the north edge of the Dead Sea, not terribly far from Jerusalem. He didn't eat anything

that whole time he was in the wilderness, so he was very hungry and probably feeling a bit weakened when the devil showed up to tempt him to turn away from his mission. But Jesus didn't give in.

Soon after Jesus' time in the wilderness, John was arrested. When he heard about it, Jesus went home. He went north, out of Judea and back to Galilee where he'd grown up. The casual observer might think that Jesus simply knew better than to stick around this close to the seat of power right then. The casual observer might think that Jesus was afraid. But Matthew counters those kinds of assumptions by placing Jesus squarely in the middle of Isaiah's words of hope and promise. Jesus wasn't running away; he wasn't just going home because he'd finished what he'd come south to do. He went to Galilee because that was where the light was to shine in the darkness; it was the place of Isaiah's prophecy.

This – Galilee, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali – is where Jesus begins. He's the embodiment of God's promise – a promise God has made and fulfilled countless times since the Assyrians. A promise to be present with his people. A promise to be faithful to his people no matter what.

We continue reading Matthew 4, at verse 17: From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

The call to repent is a call to return to God and God's ways. Before Assyria annihilated Israel, before Assyria even showed up, God had been calling the people of Israel them over and over and over again, for years and years, to return to him, to live like he wanted them to live. But Israel didn't listen. They were so enamoured by the other kingdoms, they were so enamoured by their own power, they were so thrilled with themselves that they had no time for God and they didn't listen to God's prophets.

Israel ignored God and allowed itself to be seduced by other gods and other nations. When Judah was faced with invasion from the north, Isaiah said to the king, "Do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint. Do not ally yourself with any nation. God is with you. Ally yourself with him alone."¹ (Judah didn't ally themselves with God. They actually allied themselves with Assyria.)

John the Baptist had been baptising people in the wilderness, calling them to repent – to return to God and God's ways. Many came to him. Many answered the call. But many did not.

Jesus picked up John's call, proclaiming "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Turn back to God! Turn back to God's ways! Why? because God's kingdom – a kingdom none can destroy – a kingdom that stands like a rock that cannot be moved no matter who beats against it or what weapons they wield – God's kingdom is near. Repent! Turn back to God. Realign yourself with God's ways and God's rule. Rome, with all its might and strength, cannot stand against God's kingdom. Repent! Make a choice. Will you ally yourself with Rome? Will you ally yourself with the corrupt priests of Israel? Or will you ally yourself with God?

This is the question that stands at the centre of everything Jesus said and did. It's the question that stands at the centre of every aspect of our faith as Christians. Will you ally – align, pledge allegiance to – God? Will you choose to belong to God above and instead of everything and everyone else?

In Matthew 4:18 we continue:

¹⁸ As Jesus 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 fishers. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of 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.

It started with Simon and Andrew, brothers going about the family business, called by Jesus to follow. Which they did. They walked away from that family business, and they walked toward Jesus. They changed their allegiance. The same happened with James and John. They, too, walked away from their boats – their family business – and followed Jesus. They chose to ally themselves with Jesus.

No one knows why these brothers chose to follow Jesus. But we know what he was preaching – the kingdom of heaven has come near. Maybe these men were fed up with the world in which they lived. Maybe they saw the oppressive Roman rule, coupled with the often equally oppressive rule of the priests, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes of Israel. Maybe they’d travelled south and heard John speaking, or they’d at least heard something about him. Maybe they knew John had been arrested for speaking out against Herod – the Roman installed king who ruled Galilee where they lived. Maybe they or someone they knew had been on the receiving end of Herod’s brutality and arrogance before. Maybe they’d listened to Jesus enough to hope that he might be Isaiah’s promised light shining in the darkness.

Whatever their reason, the brothers heard Jesus’ invitation and immediately followed. And as they followed, they would discover that Jesus wasn’t just inviting them into some kind of political or social rebellion or revolution. He was inviting them into a completely new way of living. He was inviting them to live allied to the ways of God’s kingdom. He was inviting them to be fishers of people – to be part of forming a new kind of community – a community that would bear witness to God’s presence and God’s ways in the world.

In Matthew 4:23 we read that Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

It must have been something to live in Galilee during those days, don’t you think? What must it have been like to hear Jesus preach and to see him cure disease and sickness? Can you imagine him seeing you at your job or doing whatever you do during the week, and saying, “Come, follow me”? Can you hear him challenging your allegiances and asking you to ally yourself with him alone?

What does that mean, to be an ally. It’s a word we hear a lot these days.

Traditionally, when we talked about being an ally, we were most likely talking about it in terms of nations and wars and the like. The nations that fought together against Germany in World War II were allies. They were united by a common interest. They shared their resources and worked together toward a shared goal.

Today we often talk about allyship in terms of solidarity between people with power or privilege and those who are marginalized in some way. It's still about being united by a common interest, but the common interest is about justice and access. It's about confronting and changing systems that actively or passively keep some people from thriving. It's about those with power and privilege doing the work of understanding their power and privilege, unlearning and re-evaluating assumptions about the other, and actively disrupting oppressive spaces and systems. It's about operating in solidarity with those who are marginalized. In short, it's about living the way Jesus taught – by the values and the responsibilities of God's kingdom.

Jesus' invitation to Simon, Andrew, James, and John is the same invitation he extends to us. It's an invitation to ally ourselves with Jesus. It's an invitation to turn from all other allegiances and toward God. It's an invitation to actively participate in God's kingdom. It's the same invitation – the same call – that Isaiah made so many hundreds of years prior. Trust in God. Rely on God. Align yourself with God.

To be an ally means more than just agreeing or feeling bad for someone else's plight. It's not about sending thoughts and prayers (though I absolutely believe praying for people is helpful). It's about actively working toward our shared goal. It's about aligning ourselves with Jesus, and those who follow him. It's about sharing our resources – not just our money or possessions, but our ideas and our talents, our experience and our history. It's about being in 'it', however we might define 'it', together.

Being allied with Jesus is about being part of a community that is shaped by the values Jesus exhibited and taught. Over the next 8 weeks, we're going to be reading all about this community and the values that give it shape. We're going to be reading through Matthew 5 – 7, which is typically referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. We start next week with the beatitudes – blessed statements – this is who's blessed and this is how they're blessed. It's a description of what it means to be part of the Community of Christ – to be allied with Christ, to share his values, to be actively participating in all of the ways that the kingdom of God is present.

A lot of what we read over the coming weeks will be difficult. In theory, I'm sure we'll like most of it. But in practice, these things Jesus taught – these values and the practices that go with them – are difficult. They challenge our selfishness and our pride – our sinfulness. They shed light on the allegiances we didn't even know we had, but that we have to turn away from if we are to truly ally ourselves with Jesus and with the people that Jesus loves.

Today, Jesus continues to extend the same invitation he extended to the brothers. Follow me. Leave your nets and join me. He's waiting to hear how we will answer.

ⁱ See Isaiah 7.