

**Sermon for
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Life Sunday**

Date: January 26, 2020

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Isaiah 9:1-4

Epistle Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Gospel Reading: Matthew 4:12-25

Sermon Text: Matthew 4:12-25

Sermon Title: Imagine An Eternal Embrace of Love

Introit: Psalm 22:27-31; Antiphon: Psalm 22:22

Hymns:

LSB 394 – Songs of Thankfulness and Praise (v.1,2,5)

Epiphany Carol (v. 1,4)

Have Mercy on Your People, Lord

LSB 971 – There Is a Redeemer

LSB 839 – O Christ, Our True and Only Light

LSB 955 – Let the Vineyards be Fruitful

Holy, Holy, Holy – Sanctus

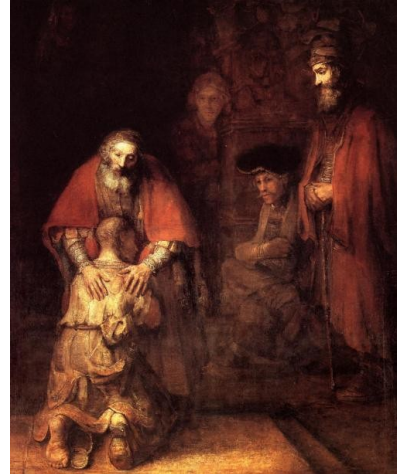
O Lamb of God We Pray

LSB 937 – Lord, Bid Your Servant Go in Peace

LSB 412 – The People That in Darkness Sat

Liturgy:

Divine Service: Creative Worship



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Text: Matthew 4:12–25

When [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people dwelling in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
on them a light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

While walking 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 fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

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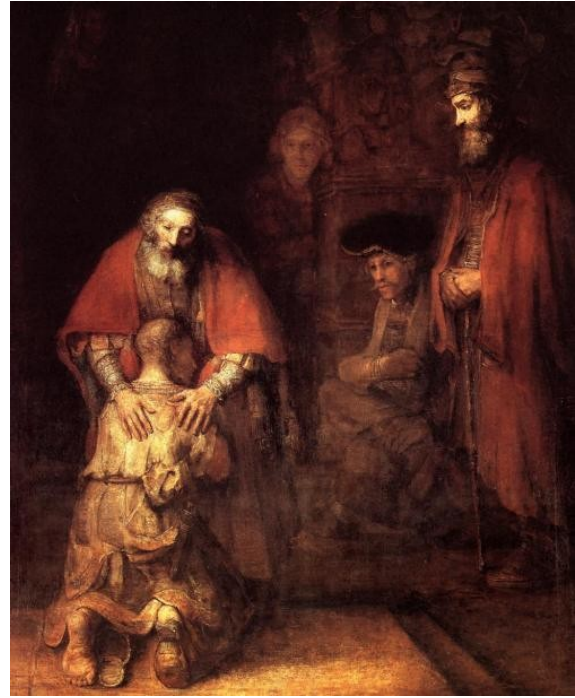
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Grace to you and peace from the Lord and Author of Life, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'd like to begin by looking at two pictures. One is an etching, and the other a painting. They are both by the same artist. They are both on the same subject, but there is a great difference between them.

The artist is Rembrandt and the subject is the return of the prodigal son. In 1636, Rembrandt created a small etching of this scene. Then 32 years later He painted a larger masterpiece. When you compare these two images you notice a world of difference.



In the etching Rembrandt focuses on action. The scene is filled with movement. People are descending a staircase. Some are watching their steps, one looks to the side, another looks down, but all are rushing to join the father, who has hurried out before them to lean over and embrace his son. The father himself is moving forward. Rembrandt catches him in mid-stride, as he rushes to reach out and grab his son.

In the painting however the picture is different. Here Rembrandt creates a sense of stillness. His focus is on presence rather than the action. No one is moving. Everyone is still. All of the people, whether standing or sitting, are gazing on one central thing: the father leaning over his son, and the son leaning into his father. These two people are locked in an eternal embrace. It is as if time has

stopped, and one sees that moment, that eternal moment, when the father acknowledges, claims, receives, blesses, and loves his son.

Rembrandt uses paint to depict a moment of love. The father embracing his son. Rembrandt recorded it so that when you look at this painting you see an eternal embrace of love. Love that endures all insults. Love that endures all trials. Love that endures all things and covers a multitude of sins.¹

I'm beginning with these images because in our Gospel reading Matthew does something very similar. Rembrandt used paint, and Matthew used words, but both are masters at helping us see God's eternal embrace of love. In Matthew's image we see that we find comfort in God's love, and it is there that we join His embrace, as He reaches out to our world today.

At first glance there is a lot of action going on. John the Baptizer is imprisoned. He has been handed over to the authorities and arrested. There are dark powers at work seeking to crush any voice that tries to speak of the kingdom of God.

When Jesus hears this He leaves His hometown and moves to Capernaum. There He doesn't disappear into silence, He enters into His own action. He picks up where John left off, and preaches about the coming of God's kingdom. He doesn't stay in one place but moves around the area. We find Him on the seashore, in the synagogues, on the roads, always speaking to people. Always moving. Always doing.

His words have power. He calls Simon and Andrew and immediately they drop their nets and follow Him. He calls James and John, and immediately they drop their nets and follow him. Not only does Jesus call people, but He casts out demons and heals diseases. There is all sorts of action in these very few verses from the Gospel of Matthew. Yet Matthew wants to keep us from being distracted by all of that action. He wants to help us look beyond the action and see the one thing that is important. Matthew wants us to see that one critically important eternal thing.

Notice how Matthew begins. He begins by taking us to the Old Testament Scriptures, to hear a prophecy from the book of Isaiah. What Jesus is doing is certainly new and exciting. It causes fishermen to drop their nets and follow. It causes strangers to drop whatever they are doing and come. They gather their sick and their paralyzed. They travel great distances carrying these people to Jesus.

What Jesus is doing causes all of this to happen but Matthew, like Rembrandt, wants us to stop and see something deeper, something more beautiful here. In the middle of all of this newness and action Matthew wants us to stop and see

1 1 Peter 4:8

something old. Matthew wants us to see God's eternal, timeless, plan. Matthew reminds us of a prophecy from Isaiah:

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.²

This place, where Jesus begins His ministry, is not in Rome at the center of power and influence in the world. Jesus is not starting in the largest or most powerful city of the Roman Empire. He is not seeking an audience before emperor Tiberius. Jesus is coming into what some would consider a backwater territory, a land that could easily be missed, overlooked, and forgotten. A land of hillbillies and hicks. Jesus begins His ministry in a place people generally dismiss.

Matthew wants us to know that this land of irrelevance and obscurity has not been irrelevant or obscure to God. God has seen this place for centuries. God has known these people before time began. From eternity God has chosen to visit these people and bring salvation to them too. They are part of God's eternal plan. All the way back in the time of Isaiah, over 600 years before Jesus was born, God had already seen these people. His hands knit them together in the womb. His power brought them by birth into the world. And now His arms are coming to reach out and hold them, in Jesus.

That was just the beginning. Ultimately Jesus would offer them an eternal embrace. He would become their Savior. His work in this world would lead to His death on the cross. There He would offer His sinless life as a perfect sacrifice for all of them, and you. He would then rise to let all people know that He had conquered sin and death, and that nothing would ever separate you from the eternal love of God.³ Jesus came for Peter and Andrew, James and John, Gentiles and Jews, all people, including you and me, and He promises to hold us in the eternal embrace of forgiving, loving, arms. God has brought you into His kingdom. He claims you as His own and promises to hold you in an eternal embrace of love.

This is what Matthew wants us to see: God's eternal love. Not because of who you are, but because of who God is. The Lord our God is love.⁴ Out of love, He called you before you were born. Out of love, He called to you when you wandered

2 Isaiah 9:1-2

3 Romans 8:38

4 1 John 4:8

away. Out of love, He came for you going into the dark corners of the world where you had buried yourself in sin and He called you out into the light.⁵

In the light, however, there is a problem. There you can see your sin. You can also see that there is nothing you have done to deserve salvation, but in the light you can also see your Savior, and everything He has done to forgive you. This Jesus, our Savior, has extended His arms on the cross and said, “I love you this much.”⁶

Rembrandt used paint, and Matthew used words, to open our eyes to the eternal embrace of God’s love. ... but what about now? What about today? Today God our Heavenly Father is using you. Not only have you been brought into God’s kingdom, but God now uses you to extend His arms into the world.

Just as there were obscure places in the Roman Empire, at the time of Jesus’ ministry, still today there are obscure places in our own country, even in our own town. Today, however, I am not talking about remote or back-water lands or city blocks. I am not talking about those people who live on the edge of civilization.

I am talking about those who live at the edge of life. Those at the very beginning and the very end of life in this world. I am talking about the unborn and the elderly. These are the people who are living in remote and lonely places among us. They cannot speak for themselves.

These people, who are carried in the darkness of the womb, or cared for in the often forgotten nursing homes are not at the center of power and influence. They do not shine in the light of celebrity news. They live in the shadows and forgotten places of a hustling and bustling world. ...but they live, and that is what is important to God. His hands have knit them together in the womb,⁷ and His arms now reach out to them, through you, in this world. Though they might often be beyond the sight of our worlds busyness, they are not beyond the sight of God. They are not beyond the reach of God. God is never too busy.

Today I’d like you to look at one simple thing. Among all the chaos and busyness of life, I want you to pause and remember God’s eternal embrace of love. That is the most important thing. That is the cause for all of this action.

Regardless of whether you are praying in your home, participating in a vigil, offering financial support, or writing to the legislature, the one most important thing is that God is continuing to come and reach out His hands to bring people, all

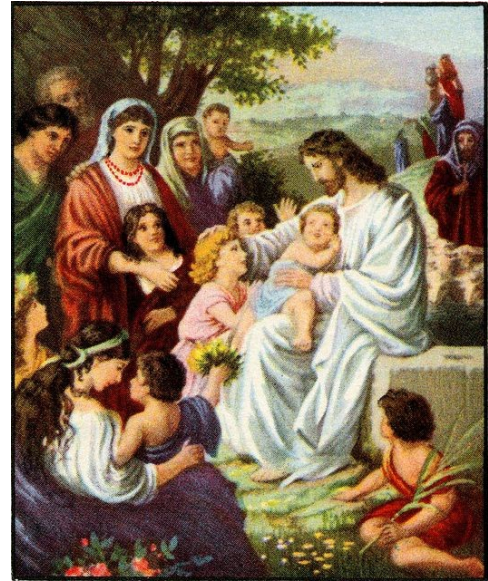
5 1 Peter 2:9

6 Luke 23:34

7 Psalm 139:13

people, even those who cannot speak for themselves, into His eternal embrace of love.

In closing, I'd like you to look at one more painting. This one is not by Rembrandt and it is not of the prodigal son. This painting seeks to capture one moment for us to ponder. A crowd has gathered. There is a swirl of activity as people are bringing their children to one man who is seated in stillness holding a child on His lap. That man is Jesus, and that child is one among many. One among millions and billions of people that Jesus has come to hold in that eternal embrace of love.



Today in prayer, we join our voices to remember and pray for those who cannot speak for themselves. This week, as you head out into the world I would encourage you to join your hands and heart to God's work.

In Jesus God has brought you into the kingdom of Heaven. He has joined you to Jesus. Now He sends you back out into the world to extend His eternal embrace of love to those who otherwise would not be seen or heard. It is God's hands that knit them and it is God's arms that hold them.

Amen.