

## Home By Another Way: Sent

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 4:23-25  
on January 29, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

Today, we conclude our month of talking through the Epiphany passages of Jesus – his infant refugee flight to Egypt, his baptism and stint in the wilderness, his calling of the disciples and now the beginning of his public ministry among the people. Next week, we'll continue our deep dive through Matthew as we begin a two month exploration of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, those collections of teachings that best capture Jesus' life lessons along the way. But before we get to the blessings ("blessed are the poor, the meek, the peacemakers"), before we're called to be salt and light, before Jesus speaks against anger and adultery, oath-keeping and retaliation, before the call to love our enemies and pray in secret and relinquish stored treasures and seek first the kingdom, before it all, we remember the ones to whom Jesus proclaims: the crowds. "When Jesus saw the crowds," Matthew 5 tells us, "he went up the mountain... and taught them." It is Jesus' life *in context* of those crowds that we'll talk about today, his life of service and healing, of teaching and proclaiming, of being among the people he's called to serve.

### II.

It's Jesus and the crowds we're talking about today – those who circle around Jesus in these two brief verses that give shape to his public ministry in the world. For in brief, we have such a picture of the shape, the focus, and the heart of Jesus and our place in it.

So what *is* the shape of Jesus' ministry? He is one who teaches and preaches and heals. He attends to mind, spirit, and body. The Word becoming flesh, and drawing flesh near to Word. Good news in abundance. Good news

animating the road home by another way. Good news that, shared and spread, changes the course of people's lives. And right at the center of this scope of Jesus' life is the good news of the kingdom of God, or God's audacious dream for this world where the hungry are filled and the shackled are liberated, where the blind see and the deaf hear, where all flourish in the abundance of God.

If that's the scope, we ask then: who is the focus? The people. Those inside the religious spaces and those on the outside. Those living with disease and sickness and pain. Those tortured by their own thoughts and bound by their own bodies. Those exiled from their communities and bereft of resources to come to their aid. Those the world around them would call "unclean" or "impure." They came to him, one streaming right after the other, in clumps and clans and crowds, from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

History tells us that those people right around Jesus were largely poor, dependent on land and sea for their living, taxed beyond their capacities with little of the benefit, and spiritually dependent on the rabbis around them to interpret the religious laws in light of their lives. They had poor living conditions and short life expectancies, laboring day and night for very little possibility of advancement. Oh they'd been promised a lot, these people in the crowds – from the Lord's covenant with Abraham, to their Roman King, to the Greek philosophies blurring into their Jewish faith. They surely had wondered when they'd receive their due, when the tide would finally turn, when the bootstraps they'd long pulled would payoff into their Galilean dream. Surely in the crowds there were some who were receptive to a new savior, ready to listen and lean into his life. Yet surely there were many

skeptical and cautious, wondering what made this man any different from the rest.<sup>1</sup>

If the scope of Jesus' public ministry is the kingdom of God, and his focus on the people around him, then we ask – where is Jesus? Scandalously right in their midst. Shockingly biased to those at the bottom. Centering their flourishing. Imbuing their lived lives with sacred worth. Making their physical, emotional, and mental health a necessary expression of the coming kingdom of God. Intertwining the ministries of teaching and proclaiming and healing and caregiving so fully in his ministry that we who follow behind should never pull them apart.

I think Jesus' scope and focus and location give us a picture of not only what it means to *follow* Jesus, but also what it means to be *sent* by Jesus into the world. You remember last week, Jesus invited the disciples, “follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And this week we have a picture of what that following looks like in practice, what Jesus says and does out in the world, such that when he sends us forward on his behalf, we have an idea of what it entails.

### III.

This image of teaching, preaching, healing, this idea of the crowds and the people he's sent to be with... it might be a slightly different picture than what some people might think that being sent by Jesus into a life of Christian faith looks like.

Now some of you are seasoned enough to remember the old offering envelopes from church – you know the ones, with all the boxes that each person was to check every Sunday, assessing the state of their walk of faith

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<sup>1</sup> Gratitude to Erik Kolbell for his description of the people to which Jesus was sent in *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, p19-21.

that week. Read my Sunday school lesson, check! Read my Bible, check! Brought my offering, check! Gone to Training Union, check! And before we knew it, this attempt to codify what it means to live the Christian life is reduced to boxes on an offering envelope, a way of faith that could be checked off with a mark of a pen, lessons completed but maybe never fully learned.

Some of you too are paying attention to expressions of American Christianity that you see and hear about online, emerging in a way you're not aligned with, where country and faith and patriotism blur together so fully in a way that makes one's Christian life and one's national heritage somehow one and the same.

Some of you see Christians living in a way that makes it abundantly clear who they *don't* like, not who they do; and what they *don't* do and what other people shouldn't do, not what they do. This image of what it means to live as followers of Jesus and be sent by him in the world has such a range of expression, doesn't it?

That's the kind of Christianity and sending forth from Jesus that Fred Craddock didn't even realize he was practicing when he first heard Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer was an organist and celebrated theologian, who at the age of 30, saw the call for medical missionaries in Gabon, in Africa. Like many other young adults whose shifting passions cause consternation among their parents paying for their education, Schweitzer went back to school to become a medical doctor to serve out his ministry as a medical missionary.

Along the way, Schweitzer dug deeply into study of the historical Jesus, looking to nonbiblical sources who talked about the young carpenter from Nazareth who lived and died. Well Fred Craddock was twenty when he read

Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. He was dismayed and found Schweitzer's Christology woefully lacking. So he marked in the book, wrote in the margins, raised questions of all kinds, tore his argument apart.

One day, he read in the paper that Albert Schweitzer was going to be in Cleveland, Ohio, to play the dedicatory concert for an organ in a big church up there. According to the article, Schweitzer would remain afterward in the fellowship hall for conversation and refreshment.

So what's a young preacher to do, but buy a Greyhound bus ticket and go to Cleveland to question Albert Schweitzer. All the way up there he worked on this *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. He laid out his questions, even had them on a separate sheet of paper, making reference to the page numbers: "You said . . ." Because he figured, if there was a conversation in the fellowship hall, there'd be room for a question or two, and he wanted to be one of them.

So he went there, heard the concert, rushed into fellowship hall, got a seat in the front row, and waited with his lap full of questions.

After a while, says Craddock, Schweitzer came in, shaggy hair, big white mustache, stooped, and seventy-five years old. He had played a marvelous concert. He was a master organist, medical doctor, philosopher, biblical scholar, lecturer, writer, everything. He came in with a cup of tea and some refreshments and stood in front of the group, and there I was, close.

Dr. Schweitzer thanked everybody: "You've been very warm, hospitable to me. I thank you for it, and I wish I could stay longer among you, but I must go back to Africa. I must go back to Africa because my people are poor and diseased and hungry a<sup>2</sup>nd dying, and I have to go. We have a medical station

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Dear Friend Alan Sherouse for sharing this story with me! Found in Fred Craddock's *Craddock Stories*, Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, Editors, pp. 125 – 126.

in Lambarene. If there's anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus, would you be prompted by that love to go with me and help me?"

Says Craddock, "I looked down at my questions; they were so absolutely stupid. And I learned, again, what it means to be Christian and had hopes that I could be that someday."

#### IV.

Schweitzer demonstrated what Henri Nouwen once said: "the whole message of the gospel is this: become like Jesus."<sup>3</sup> To that, author Debie Thomas adds: "What Jesus bears witness to ... is God's unwavering proximity to pain, suffering, sorrow, and loss. God is nearest to those who are lowly, oppressed, unwanted, and broken. God isn't obsessed with the shiny and the impressive; God is too busy sticking close to what's messy, chaotic, unruly, and unattractive."<sup>4</sup>

So what might that mean for you and me today? Given the scope and the focus and the location of Jesus's public ministry in the world, and given the call of Jesus' followers to go into the world, what does it look like to be sent?

To be sent by Jesus, I think, means to be sent to the crowds.

To be sent by Jesus means to be sent to God's beloved children – who, here in our country, are 16.9% living under the poverty rate; girls who, by the time they're 6 (!) are worrying about their weight; who are dying most – most! – because of guns; who are among the 20% of kids worldwide who live with anxiety. To be sent by Jesus means to be sent to God's beloved children.

To be sent by Jesus means being sent to God's beloved teenagers and young adults – almost all of which are online (97% of teenagers have a

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted in *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p6.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2511-the-blessing-and-the-bite>

smartphone and being formed by the whirlwind they find there); who, in record numbers, are in a crisis of anxiety and depression and loneliness; who are feeling pressure from the earliest days of adolescence to pick a career path that will lead to success. To be sent by Jesus means being sent to God's beloved teenagers and young adults.

To be sent by Jesus means being sent to God's beloved adults – those who carry the weight of the world on their shoulders; who are sandwiched between caregiving for children and parents, grandchildren or grandparents; who are drowning in debt and one health crisis away from bankruptcy; who are in pain and lonely, who long for friendship and connection and well-being but just can't seem to fit it in (where do you fit this in?!) amidst all the other demands of their lives. To be sent by Jesus means being sent to God's beloved adults.

To be sent by Jesus means being sent to God's beloved seniors – who grieve the losses of independence and identity and relationships that matter; who learn to live in bodies that are increasingly unfamiliar and hard and might even feel like are betraying them; who approach this significant season formed by the aches of all that have come before in the hopes of finding reconciliation before the sun sets. To be sent by Jesus means being sent to God's beloved seniors.

To be sent by Jesus means being sent to God's beloved everywhere – to those without a home or a paycheck; to those with more time or power or resources than they know how to use meaningfully; to those who fear for their lives at a traffic stop or a hateful law; to those who yearn for the peace that will allow for a true and abiding rest to finally settle into the marrow of

their being. To be sent by Jesus means being sent to God's beloved – everywhere.

To be sent by Jesus into this world means being sent to God's beloved crowds.

The good news is that we don't have to travel far! We don't have to travel far, because we look around at those hopeful faces and longing spirits and we realize that the crowd is far more "us" than "them." For to be sent by Jesus means to come home by another way, right to the heart of ourselves, where God waits to look us squarely in the eyes with no less than a promise of our belovedness.

Actually the good news isn't just that we don't have to travel far. The good news is that to be sent by Jesus means to go right to Jesus, because he's there – there in the crowds of the suffering and the silenced, there in the crowds of the heartbroken and the hungry, there in the crowds of the lonely and the languishing – there he is. Right in the heart of it all. Right where we belong.

Amen.