

## “A Different Path”

“From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

We called it “the Bank,” even though it bore no resemblance to the financial institutions in my hometown that bore that name. It was a wooded area behind our neighbourhood that was down an embankment, which we shortened to “Bank.” It was a favourite playground of ours, even though our parents frowned on our playing there since it also bordered the notorious Route 22, one of the busiest and most treacherous highways in New Jersey. To us, however, it was a place of endless adventures; we built tree forts, skated on a pond that would form after heavy rains and cold temperatures, and invented all sorts of games that we would play among the trees. But the best feature of the Bank was the path that took us to the Peanut Shop, one of the many temptations that attracted us in our community. Temptation was a reality that challenged us no matter what route we took from our neighbourhood to Stony Brook School; in addition to the Peanut Shop there was a Dairy Queen, a corner candy store, a Grigsby’s Kitchen that made the best chocolate chip cookies in town. When we would walk home from school, I could hear my mother’s voice warning me not to give in to these temptations because they would “ruin my appetite” for dinner; but the lure of fresh-roasted peanuts, fresh-baked cookies, and ice cream cones dipped in chocolate had a powerful appeal. I often thought of this on Sunday mornings when we prayed the Lord’s Prayer; when we prayed “lead us not into temptation,” I thought of both our walk home from school and our path through the Bank that would lead us on that “Road to Perdition.”

That path through the Bank was such an important part of our lives that it never dawned on us that one day it might disappear; but on one afternoon we came home from school, changed into our play clothes, and were about to go “down the Bank” when we were met by a sight that was both startling and unsettling: construction equipment that was uprooting the trees and leveling our beloved bank. Because it was prime real estate, a developer had bought the property and would soon construct a strip mall in the place where we staged epic battles, imagined winning the Stanley Cup, and made our afternoon journeys to answer the siren call of fresh-roasted peanuts. It was a sad day that marked not only the end of our favourite play area but meant that we needed to follow a different path to give in to our temptations.

There are many occasions in which we may find ourselves needing to follow a different path. It happens when a hiking trail or road has been closed either for construction or because the path can no longer be traveled; we experienced having to take different paths this summer due to the road construction on many streets here in Stratford. But not all choices to take a different path are necessarily physical ones; many people find themselves taking different career paths, choosing to change direction in where they were planning on focusing their careers to follow a road that will lead them in a very different direction. Many people find themselves moving from their hometowns to new communities in order to start a new job, settle into life with a new spouse, or begin a new chapter in their lives following retirement. Sometimes that path that one is following leads to a dead end that leaves no other choice other than to change direction so that they might find a path that will lead them forward to a new and brighter future. In the immortal words of Robert Frost, *“two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by; and that has made all the difference.”*

Two weeks ago, we met our Lord Jesus Christ as he appeared on the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by John and to hear the heavenly voice proclaim that *“this is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* (Matthew 3:17). Jesus is then led on a path that is not of his own choosing: *“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil”* (4:1). The temptation ordeal was arduous, but Jesus defeats the power of Satan through the power of the Word of God; the devil leaves defeated, *“and suddenly angels came and waited on him.”* (4:11). Jesus might have preferred to stay in this place, but soon his path took him on a journey that was essential to fulfilling his mission to be the Saviour of all people: *“Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee”* (4:12). The reference to John being “arrested” (*paradidomi*) is the same word used to refer to Judas’ betrayal of Jesus and for God’s act of delivering Jesus up for human sins (*“Jesus said to [Judas], ‘Friend, do what you are here to do.’ Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.”* – 26:50); the word also refers to Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant (*“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”* (Isaiah 53:6)). Jesus’ decision to withdraw to Galilee is not an act of cowardice, self-preservation, or strategy; it is a representation of Jesus’ alternate vision of kingship which is nonviolent and non-retaliatory (*“Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”* – 26:52). The wilderness ordeal behind him, Jesus returns to his home region of Galilee, prompted by the news of John’s arrest; this marks a turning point, a different path that propels Jesus into a new place of activity. Jesus chooses to make his base of operations in Capernaum, a larger city than his hometown of Nazareth that was the home of Simon

Peter and Andrew that would soon become his “*own town*” (9:1). For Matthew, the choice of Capernaum also signalled the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that speaks of a grand reversal when the spiritual darkness of Galilee will be dispelled by the dawn of the new age when the ideal king will appear: “*Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.*” (4:15-16; Isaiah 9:1-2). Nazareth was in the Old Testament territory of Zebulun, while Capernaum was in the territory of Naphtali. The reference to “Galilee of the Gentiles” signals that “*the Lord’s ministry in the multiethnic land of Galilee foreshadows the church’s later mission to all nations*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri); it also fulfills the song of Simeon which celebrates the coming of Christ as “*a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*” (Luke 2:32).

Once he enters the region of Galilee, Jesus begins his public ministry with the proclamation that calls people to “*repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” (4:17). The phrase “*from that time on*” is an expression that Matthew uses to mark an important transition in the story line; here it introduces the public activity of Jesus in Galilee. “Repent” (*metanoeo*) does not refer to sorrow or remorse for one’s sins but refers to a change of direction in one’s life: “*Get yourself a new orientation in the way you live, then act on it.*” (M. Eugene Boring). Jesus’ message urges his listeners to change the direction of their lives, to adopt a new way of thinking and acting. The call to repentance is followed by the announcement that the kingly reign of God is on the verge of arrival, which gives urgency to the call to change the direction of one’s life, to travel a different path; the people must be ready to embrace the Kingdom of God when it comes.

- “That is why we do not pray, ‘let us come into your kingdom,’ as if we should run after it, but ‘may your kingdom come to us.’ For the grace of God and his kingdom, with all the virtues thereof, must come to us, if ever we are to inherit it. Of ourselves we can never come to the kingdom. Similarly, Christ came to us from heaven to earth; we did not ascend from earth into heaven to him.”  
– Martin Luther.

Following the proclamation which will form the content of his preaching throughout the Gospel, Jesus calls his first disciples who will form the messianic community that is the Church. In Jesus’ time, rabbis did not seek out students but were sought out by applicants; but in this episode all the initiative is with Jesus as the primary actor. Matthew reports that “*as he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea –*

*for they were fishermen.* (4:18). We are not told why Jesus is attracted to these brothers, but he takes the initiative in issuing an invitation to discipleship: “*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people*” (4:19). Jesus’ call is both a command and a promise; “follow me” is a command for them to become his disciples, accompanied by the promise that they will participate in Jesus’ divine mission to humanity. Neither brother speaks a word, but the power of Jesus’ invitation is so profound that “*immediately they left their nets and followed him*” (4:20). As Jesus continues his journey along the shore of the sea, he comes across another set of brothers, “*James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them*” (4:21). Once again Jesus’ call is so powerful that “*immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him*” (4:22). Without saying a word, both sets of brothers leave behind the path that their families had followed for generations and follow Jesus on the path he invites them to journey, not knowing where this path might lead them. Some have identified this as Jesus’ first miracle, the miracle of his powerful word that creates a following, that makes disciples; “*the messianic community, the church, comes into being in response to Jesus’ own word.*” (Boring).

- “Remarkably, all four of these people, just as they are, follow after this stranger who interrupts their daily routine. All that is asked of them at this point is simply that they follow: as they are, from where they are, being who they are. As is true for the followers of Jesus who come after him, the meaning of their choice will unfold over time.” – Audrey West.

Having called his first disciples, Matthew reports that “*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*” (4:23). Preaching and teaching are closely associated in Matthew (“*Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities*” – 11:1). Prior to the resurrection the disciples do not teach; it is in his final appearance to them that the Risen Lord commissions his apostles “*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*” (28:19-20). Jesus’ acts of healing place his instruction in the context of his previous acts of announcing the Kingdom and acting in mercy to illustrate its power and nature. The people are healed by Jesus without meeting any requirements or making any confession of faith; *it is entirely the initiative and grace of the messianic representative of God’s Kingdom.*” (Boring). Jesus’ ministry that involves both preaching and teaching the gospel as well as curing physical and spiritual ailments shows that he is not merely

interested in instructing his followers on the theology of the Kingdom of Heaven but making that Kingdom real in the lives of suffering humanity.

- “For Matthew the kingdom of God is not an ideal, a principle, or an abstraction, but was definitely revealed and embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus. This is why ‘kingship’ language is so important throughout the Gospel of Matthew, from the opening scene in which the newborn king is a threat to the kingdoms of this world (2:1-23), to the closing scene, where the ‘king of Israel’ is the crucified one who gives himself for others and then is vindicated and given ‘all authority’ (28:16-20).” – Boring.

Choosing to follow a different path may be exciting but can also be filled with anxiety and uncertainty as we follow a way that is less familiar than the old paths upon which we journeyed. For the first disciples who answered Jesus’ call to discipleship, it meant leaving behind the paths that defined their lives to follow the path that would now define them as disciples of Christ and apostles called to bring the good news of our Lord and Saviour to the ends of the earth:

- “Those first disciples, for their part, might have preferred to keep their jobs, to remain with their families, to stay with the life they knew. When they see Jesus and hear his words to them, they make a different choice, however; they take a risk, step out in faith, leave behind that which is comfortable and secure. They choose to follow Jesus.” – West.

The disciples who choose to follow the different path upon which Jesus invites them to walk will discover that this path will lead them to places with which they might not be familiar and experiences that they might not choose on their own. When Jesus restores Peter after his three denials following Jesus’ arrest, Jesus warns him that *“when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go”* (John 21:18), a prediction of Peter’s martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When Saul of Tarsus is traveling to Damascus to continue his reign of terror against the early church, he is struck blind on the road so that he might follow a different path as the Apostle Paul, the one who will be *“an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel”* (Acts 9:15). For all who answer Jesus’ call to discipleship and his invitation to follow the different path upon which Jesus invites them to journey, what lies ahead of them might be unfamiliar and fraught with danger, but it is a path that will lead to the place where our Lord will gather his people, so that no matter how difficult the journey may be the destination will be glorious.

- “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.” – Philippians 3:12-16.

Jesus' call to every generation of his followers is to choose to accompany Jesus along this different path that defines who we are as God's people. The call to repentance is a call of us to turn away from paths that lead us away from God toward destinations that may seem appealing but lead us away from the source of our light and life. In baptism we are reborn children of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to shine the light of Christ in all we say and do; as we affirm these baptismal promises, we endeavor to follow the different path of servanthood as we strive to *“serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth”* (ELW Affirmation of Baptism).

- “For in truth we are not called once only, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us. He called us first in Baptism, but afterwards also; whether we obey his voice or not, He graciously calls us still. If we fall from our baptism, He calls us to repent; if we are striving to fulfill our calling, He calls us on from grace to grace, and from holiness to holiness, while life is given us. Abraham was called from his home, Peter from his nets, Matthew from his office, Elisha from his farm, Nathanael from his retreat; we are all in course of calling, on and on, from one thing to another, having no resting place, but mounting towards our eternal rest, and obey one command only to have another put upon us.” – John Henry Newman.

Taking a different path to the Peanut Shop was not one we would have chosen, but the loss of the Bank left us with no choice. While the disciples had the choice to follow the different path upon which Jesus calls us, it may lead us to situations and ordeals that would not be of our choosing or what we would prefer. But when we follow the path of discipleship we are following the one who cautions would-be disciples that *“if any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”* (16:24), that the different path of Jesus is the path of servanthood as followers of *“the Son of Man [who] came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45).

- “The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life. The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ’s sake.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Following a different path to the source of our temptation was not a choice we would have made but one that was forced upon us. The different path upon which Jesus calls us to follow leads us away from paths that would tempt us to journey away from God and offers us the promise of a destination where we will dwell in the loving presence of our Lord and Saviour forever. As people who are called to be the disciples of Christ in this generation, may we decide to follow our Lord on this different path so that we might continue the mission of the apostolic church to serve in obedience to our Lord’s command to *“care for all without reserve, and spread God’s liberating word.”* (ELW Hymn 729).

Amen.