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January 27, 2008
Matthew 4.12-22
“A strategic retreat”

I find it interesting that Jesus preached his first sermons in darkness. We like to think of Jesus working under the bright lights from start to finish. We easily imagine him under the star of Bethlehem, or coming up from the River Jordan in the midst of bright light from heaven, or on top of the mountain, transfigured and radiant. At many strategic points in the story, the spot light is trained on him by the gospel writers, so you can't miss that what is happening here is important.

But the preaching begins rather inauspiciously. It's "on the road by the sea," in the "region of Zebulun and Naphtali." When I was eleven, I played Pee Wee football in a suburban community on the eastern edge of Raleigh, North Carolina. There was a town a few miles out in the hinterlands called Zebulun. It seemed like nowheresville to a big-city Raleigh-ite. The "country boys" from Zebulun, I always imagined, were well-fed, uncivilized, and contemptuous of skinny city kids. Maybe those are some key ingredients to a good football team. Well, they *were* pretty good football players, and my imagination was often bolstered by the bits of grass and dirt that would get stuck in my facemask and that I would humbly pluck out after one episode after another of being knocked to the ground.

I don't know what the denizens of Zebulun were like in Jesus' day—my guess is that they were rather *poorly* fed by comparison, but they may have seemed just as uncivilized and contemptuous of city kids. Jesus was from Nazareth, a place which recent archaeological work has found to be analogous to a modern suburb. It was a bedroom community for a regional population and trade center called "Sefaris." It was a comparatively well-to-do place. Nazareth, you might say, was strategically located for the launch of a new religion or a new movement. From Nazareth, Jesus could have easily walked into the city and began recruiting disciples from all over. He could have found hoards of listeners to his message, and there would have been plenty of people to heal and many, many others to impress with his healings.

But after John the Baptist was killed, Jesus did what is fully understandable in human terms—he fled the bright city lights for awhile. He took to the country road that wound into the backwaters of Galilee. He left the city and its Roman military presence and found refuge "in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali." Can you see the headlines of the Rome Tribune? "INSURGENT LEADER FLEES."

January 27th, 24 AD, Sepharis—Tribune sources have confirmed that Jesus of Nazareth, known associate of the recently killed insurgent leader John the Baptist, has fled the region and has now found safe haven somewhere in Galilee. Military officials dismiss charges that they have let a dangerous leader escape. One centurion in the region, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told the Tribune, "We are seeing the insurgency fragmenting and breaking apart. Jesus of Nazareth isn't the only insurgent who has left the area. They're all leaving. The streets are mostly empty. Violence is down. Our stepped up military presence in the region is clearly working."

But what was Jesus doing in Galilee? What did he hope to accomplish by retreating from the street sweeps of the occupied city, other than mere survival? It is important to see how politically charged all of this is. I am drawing comparisons between ancient Galilee and modern Iraq because the similarity is striking in many ways. Galileans were under the economic and political strain of an occupation that they did not choose. They didn't all agree with each other in matters of religion or politics, but in areas of greater poverty there was agreement that the occupiers must go. The preaching of a Muqtada Al Sadr would have been popular there, and many of Jesus early hearers would have been expecting a similar message.

This was the darkness in which Jesus seems to have preached his first sermons. But what was the content of those sermons? What rhetoric did he employ to gather his disciples? In the summary form that is recorded for

us, Jesus' message seems to have been a continuation of what John had preached: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." Now, if we want to understand who Jesus was, we need to get a handle of the meaning of those first sermons. I suggest that, in order to do that, we need to grasp the meaning of the very first word. Everything hangs, it seems to me, on the meaning of the word, "Repent."

"Repent" is a poorly understood word in our time. We tend to think of it in individualistic terms. Bad habits and vices are things that should be repented of, perhaps. But the word "repent" may have had strong political overtones in Jesus' day—it may well have been directed to an entire social and political order that was keeping people down. "Repent" may often have understood as directed outward, toward some government or institution outside of one's private self.

Actually, come to think of it, that's not all that different from the way we think of it, is it? We don't think of the need to "repent" or change one's ways in political terms, perhaps, but we do think of it mostly as someone else's work, someone else's obligation. We do think of repentance or change or transformation in mostly outward-directed ways. Spouses want to change each other. Co-workers want to enhance each others' performance. Pastors want to change their congregations and congregations want to change their pastors!

But what if that's not what Jesus meant at all? What if "repent" is supposed to apply to everyone who hears it, and not to someone else? What if, when you hear it, you are supposed to think first of you? Or, when I hear it, what if I am supposed to think first of me?

That seems obvious, if we put the matter that way. But it isn't obvious, somehow, at least not when the rubber hits the proverbial road. If we hear these first sermons this way, I suggest, they are not the message of insurgency, but the message of the cross. They are not a way to rally the forces of dissatisfaction in order to storm the castle, but a way to shed light on the sources of dissatisfaction within. And that is important for understanding who Jesus was and what his mission was about. Truthfully, Jesus didn't bring salvation or liberation or even healing. He *was* salvation and liberation and healing. As he gathered and led his movement, Jesus didn't use force to defeat evil because his way of life, lived intentionally and purposefully and not derailed by other people's warped demands and expectations, *was* a defeat of evil. And, in the end, Jesus didn't have to kill to save his life, but affirmed his life in the most radical way, affirmed what he stood for, affirmed the Kingdom whose nearness he proclaimed, precisely by the way he died.

If we would like a modern analogue by which we might understand Jesus and his message, we would be much closer choosing Mohatma Ghandi instead of Muqtada Al Sadr. That can't be a surprise to hear! But the truth is that Al Sadr's sermons probably have an easier time finding traction. "We will gather our forces to impose our will." Isn't that an ear tickler? We don't rely upon contraband weaponry, of course, but we do use rumor, gossip, retreat and entrenchment, and all sorts of more civilized measures in order to direct the demand for repentance outward rather than inward.

Ghandi's movment, on the other hand, was guided by the much more demanding and also liberating message: "Be the change you want." For the Al Sadr's of the world, and that includes you and me, at times, "repentance" is a fighting word. That's probably why it has become so unpopular, in fact: it has become a kind of sword that we wield to coerce or cajole others. For the Ghandi's of the world, on the other hand, repentance is something very different. It is an opportunity. The kingdom of God is at hand! I am empowered to be the transformation I want! I don't have to waste my energy trying to change others. I don't have to get my way; I don't have to wage war. I can not only pray for peace and justice, but I can put feet to my prayers and live into their reality.

Very soon it will be Lent. Lent leans a lot of different things to a lot of people. For some it is a time of serious self-examination, and for others the forty days pass without much notice. Some years are different than others, because in some years we can bear self-examination more easily than in others. But let Lent be for each of us this year at least this much: let it be a strategic retreat. May each of us retreat to the "road by the Sea" with

Jesus. May we hear his message the way it was meant to be heard: as our opportunity to *be* salvation, liberation, and healing. Amen.