

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## THE GATHERING

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The summons has gone out to the whole world. God has called us by his name. We are to be gathered, but why and from where?

When Isaiah speaks these words, he is speaking to those in exile. Assyria has dispersed the northern kingdom of Israel and Nebuchadnezzar has taken Judah into Babylon. The people of Israel, the people of the Promise have been dispersed.

Have they lost the promise? No. Through Isaiah, God tells his dispersed people that they are not to be afraid – they are still his – even though they are in a foreign land. He is still with them, he still loves them and he will gather them again.

What we do not read in this passage is the reason for which they were scattered in the first place. When looking at the history of humankind, it does not take the special powers of observation and analysis of a Sherlock Holmes to recognize the answer. Sin is the root of all our problems. Our separation from God and our alienation from one another are the natural consequences of sin; our willful decision to have things our own way. The universal rule is that sin scatters.

But, where sin scatters, God gathers.

We began the service this morning with the words:

*There is one Body and one Spirit.  
There is one hope in God's call to us;  
One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism;  
One God and Father of all. (BCP, p.299)*

It is God who created you, who knows your name and who calls you by name.

In Advent we read that John...

<sup>3</sup>...went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.*

<sup>5</sup> *Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,*

*and the rough ways made smooth;*

<sup>6</sup> *and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”* (Luke 3:3-6)

And then today we heard John say,

<sup>16</sup> *... “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

The Messiah, the Lord, will baptize with the Holy Spirit and gather his people, like a farmer at the harvest gathers his wheat into the granary.

Jesus is the Word of God coming into the world and going throughout the world saying...

<sup>6</sup> *... “Give them up,”  
... “Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth—*

<sup>7</sup> *everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.”*

We are called to be citizens of the Kingdom of God. But in order to become citizens we must renounce our citizenship in the world. In other words, God calls us, but we have to make a choice in order to be gathered.

To choose our own way is to continue to live in sin and remain identified as “scattered;” the chaff. Alternatively, we enter the kingdom by responding in obedience to God’s call. It is the choice symbolized in Scripture and the Church by baptism, in which we renounce the ways of the world and submit to God’s Way.

In this season of Epiphany, in which we celebrate the manifestation of Jesus as Lord of the world, we are no longer responding to a disembodied word, but to the Incarnate Word. In the language of the Gospel, God’s call is articulated in the invitation to “Follow me.”

The *Book of Common Prayer* explains this connection between following Jesus and being baptized. When the Celebrant prays God’s blessing over the water, it is with these words.

*We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.  
Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.  
Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage  
in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus  
received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy*

*Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.*

*We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

*Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior. (BCP, pp. 309-310)*

Our call is the call to follow Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. Through that call we are gathered out of the population of slaves who live in bondage to the world and gathered into the kingdom of God as eternally free citizens.

Let us pray.

Father, as we gather around the baptismal font and Holy Table this morning, pour out your holy Spirit on the little ones who will be baptized and on all of us as we renew our baptismal promises. Empower us to follow you in all our ways, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

*Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on January 10, 2010, the First Sunday after the Epiphany.*