



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 25, 2026
ISAIAH 9:1-4; PSALM 27: 1, 5-13; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-18; MATTHEW 4:12-23

PHARAOH IS NOT OUR PRIMARY FOCUS

Matthew 4:12-23 [*When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. As he walked 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 fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.]*

Last Tuesday I joined with three rabbis and three other Christian clergy here in Seattle in what was the first substantial interfaith dialogue we've had in our city for more than two years.

It was good to be together, and we covenanted to continue to meet every six weeks or so as we find our way together as people of faith in these challenging times. Grounded in a desire for deeper relationship and committed to speaking the truth and love to one another, we found that we have much in common. And

much less in disagreement. And so I am in hopeful ways in the wake of it.

I am utterly convinced that people of faith have something to speak into the abyss of the chaos in which we find ourselves in this time.

You have heard me say before that the Church was made for times such as this! I believe it with all my heart. That doesn't mean we have it all figured out, or that we know exactly how things are going to unfold. But I do believe that God will guide us if we will let God guide us. This is our bedrock narrative really as people of faith;

we must learn it anew in this time that God will guide us, if we will just trust.

One of the rabbis present last Tuesday opened our time together with a brief reflection on scripture. He took it from the 10th chapter of Exodus, which is also a part of our bedrock narrative, by the way. In this 10th chapter, the 9th plague of Egypt descends upon the land and the people. The 9th plague being darkness, which comes after eight previous plagues, including blood, and flies, and boils, and locusts. Just counted all as misery.

But then the Lord God says to Moses in verse 21 of the 10th chapter, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be felt.” So Moses does what he is told and there was dense darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. ²³ People could not see one another, and for three days they could not move from where they were...”

The rabbi on Tuesday shared a midrash that this darkness was like no other darkness ever known to humanity—not just nighttime, but a spiritual darkness, palpable, heavy, even depressive, a kind of darkness so thick you can reach out and touch it. But the Israelites, Exodus says, the Israelites had light still. The midrash teaches that they had light because they had God still in their sights, the God of their salvation.

This theme of light in times of darkness is intimately connected with our readings this morning, from Isaiah and Matthew:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness and the shadow of death—on them light has shined.

And then the psalm today, as earnest a prayer for a time such as this: *God is my light and my salvation.*

Back in Egypt, where imperial rule had cast its long shadow of oppression across the land and the people, scripture tells us the plagues took their toll, and after the 9th plague, after three dark days—which is to say, the fullness of time—Pharaoh summons Moses and says take your people and go... only leave your flocks and herds. Economic extraction.

Somehow Moses musters the courage to say to Pharaoh, no, we will take our flocks and our herds with us, we will go, “not a hoof will be left behind” the scripture says. One of the greatest lines in all of scripture... “not a hoof will be left behind.” Try that on at work this week... “not a hoof will be left behind.”

Moses is speaking prophetic truth to power. And then he says Pharaoh, you will see me no more. Enough.

You know the story... it doesn't end there... there's a tenth plague, death, Passover,

hardened hearts, Red Sea parting, and a long arduous journey through the desert.

In the midrash Moses tells his people we go. We go even though we don't know exactly where or how. We go because this is who we are—we are God's people bearing witness to another way in these dark times. It is a way of liberating presence in a very dark world. And God is the light by which we will find our way. Can you see how timely this teaching is for us? When power clashes and people—good people—lie dead in the streets.

We cannot know exactly how things will unfold in these chaotic times, but we can trust that God will guide us. Can we trust that God will give us the words of prophetic courage to speak our truth, guided by our values? It may mean that we suffer consequences along the way, but we are called to press on.

So what does this mean for us in this situation here and now?

Well, I would suggest to you show up. Show up as we worship God here, as we pray, as we engage in community, as we discern our voices in these dark times. Undergirding all of that, all of who we are is not a reactive flash at every turn of events, but rather a resolute focus on who we are, and who God is calling us to be in this time. Moses models this for us. Exodus is speaking to us in this time.

Now I know I am speaking to the choir here... you are here, you are worshipping.

Being present for worship is probably the most radically subversive thing we can do in these times. We show up. Let it shape you as it shapes this community. Let the light of God's love shine on you and let your light shine in the world. That's how things will change.

We are in this for the long haul, friends. For the duration. The proverbial forty years of scriptural and spiritual significance. We need not name the woes and the wiles of the world every Sunday in explicit fashion to be faithful to our vocation as ones who answer the call to follow Jesus here and now and to proclaim to all people the good news of God's salvation, that's how our collect exhorts us today.

Let me say it a little more emphatically— whoever preaches here from this pulpit each Sunday need not catalog the problems in our times every single week for us to know that it's dark times. The preachers need not orient the sermon to Pharaoh's hardness of heart at every turn for us to share good news with one another and into the world. Pharaoh would have loved Moses to give him his priority attention and focus. But Moses said No, you can't have it.

Sometimes we need to name the elephant in the room; yes, we do. Sometimes we just need to show up and hear the good news. The good news, knowing there is darkness out there. Moses didn't persevere on Pharaoh in every moment. Neither should we.

So we worship and we pray to remain focused on what matters. From the grounding in one's spiritual life comes action, not the other way around. Let me say it again—From the grounding in one's spiritual life comes the action, not the other way around.

It is a lifelong journey for us... we will figure it out together as we find our way.

And let me say, we follow Jesus in his nonviolent ways. I know there is a lot that wants to have us to turn to anger. The Pharaohs of the world would love nothing more than to make this a violent thing. But Jesus says No. Non-violence is a way of life for courageous people. It is not just a moment in time; it is a way of life for courageous people of faith. And we are called to be the courageous people of God in this time and place. We are casting our nets in our seaside town. We won't do it perfectly, but we can do it faithfully and peacefully.

And so here on this Annual Meeting Sunday when we gather together as a parish as a people of faith—I will say once more friends, I don't know how all this is going to unfold. We cannot know with full clarity where this journey will take us, but we can make the trek together with courage because this is who we are.

We are God's people bearing witness to another way, it is the loving way, the life-giving way, a liberating way. Not just for us but for others in a very dark world. And we have to always remember God is the light by which we will find our way.

God is our light and our salvation. That's the good news we proclaim. I'm willing to stake my life on it, will you too?



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL