

St Pius & St Anthony 3rd Sunday Ordinary Time Homily 2026 Year A

Matt 4:12 tells us that *“When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee”* Why did Jesus withdraw? What does that mean? I compare it to the reaction we might have when we are confronted with an emotionally-laden deeply striking piece of information, and we respond, “Give me a moment”. We need to process it! It is all coming at Him, and it hits Him: “It’s time!” I suspect Jesus, let’s remember that He shares our human nature fully, so its understandable that this is a period of internal mourning, yes, sadness, and Jesus withdraws to ‘process’ it. Jesus is aware that John is not going to walk out of Herod’s prison of his own piece or in one piece (really!). I think Jesus’ mind flashes forward to reflect upon His own eminent passion & suffering. I see this act of ‘withdrawing’, just like when He will withdraw after the Last Supper into the garden to pray, and weigh over the impending days and hours (Mt 26:36-46).

I wonder if His reaction here could be similar to how he steps back and takes a minute earlier in His ministry, when He gets news about another friend, Lazarus being ‘deathly sick’? John 11:6 says that after Jesus got word from Lazarus’ sisters, He still “remained for two days in the place where he was.” We will hear further that when Jesus does get to Bethany, He ‘feels deeply’ with them (*grief is not great for anyone to feel, but for us seeing him heart-broken this way, is so good, because it shows how much our shepherd-who himself became a lamblike us-he knows just what it feels like to be us-shares our human emotions*) Jn 11:35-6 says He even wept noticeably with sisters at Lazarus’ tomb. We also see this in Jesus, processing His grief, when we hear Him sigh deeply with sadness at the Mount overlooking Jerusalem because of its refusal of Him and His message (*Matt 23:37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling”*). Jesus, like us, knows what it means to ‘to take a moment’ to draw back saddened, a little or a lot, over life’s trials and to gather oneself again.

To further show Jesus divinely emphatic heart, where does Jesus go to take ‘time out’? Identifying with our woes, He goes to the oppressively discouraged and put upon area of Zebulun & Naphtali, a land ‘locked’ in depression. (fulfills His promise ‘When you visited the sick (*discouraged*)...when you visited the imprisoned (*depressed*), you did it for me...” (Matt 25:39-40)

But we may ask, “Why that area Zebulun/Naphtali – what was up/down with it?” Why is that land prophetic? Well, Matt 4:16 (quoting Isaiah 8:23, 9:1) goes on to say, ‘those **people in darkness** are visited with great light.... In a land **overshadowed by death**, a light has arisen.....’ But also we may ask, “Why was Zebulun/Naphtali so darkened, and shadowed by death?”

Well, they were the two areas of land (Gen 49), deeded by Jacob to sons of those names. They were way-northern border areas to the overall kingdom (which brings all the risks/vulnerabilities of being on the frontier – constant threat of invasion (which happens by the Assyrians) & living distantly from base/capital (or on edge?). And they weren't just extreme northern, but living west of the Lake/Sea Galilee & facing westward the Great Sea (Mediterranean), they were also along major trade routes – market shipping lanes of caravans & merchants (with all of the commerce and cultural mixing of interests that comes with big business (the Purists at Jerusalem saw them as 'watered down-compromised' Hebrews-recall Nathaniel's racist anti-Galilean remark in Jn 1:46, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" So easily, Naphtali/Zebulun could not only be put down by actual conquering armies & foreign occupation, but also enslaved by binding corporate colonialism (*outside power players who buy their way into a local economy, to exploit the heavier traffic.... think of interstate exchanges which often funnel away all the local income to foreign shareholders!*). And I also visualize Zebulun/Naphtali being shouldered by high mountains, that also darkened or shadowed the low-valley trade roads running through it (which has its own geographical vulnerabilities -runoff, landslide).

So, certainly, Zebulun/Naphtali are a depressed place, in need of hope, and when Jesus learns that John is arrested (It is on!), then Jesus goes first to the lowest and least place to bring that hope, to lift up and provide an eternally good future to look forward to (*the whole mission – Proclaim 'Kingdom of God at hand'*)

Gospel means 'Good News', and who needs it most but people overwhelmed with bad news. Isn't this the beauty of Jesus, that He may meet us where we are, but most important about this meeting, is that Jesus doesn't leave us there, if He enters into our suffering with us, it is to get us out of it!

I can think of this reading being so timely, as this cloudy dark season of year saps a lot of people's hope. What do we call it: **SAD-Seasonal Affective Disorder**, when the environment conditions us to be down, with short days – lots of clouds and frequent rain (even if only misty fog--I think especially of the very difficult areas to live in such as the near constant gloomy rain of Seattle or parts of Alaska —Fairbanks-Anchorage when there's only 3-4 hours daylight. That's Zebulun/Naphtali!)

So, Who most needs hope and light, and that is who Jesus goes to! To bring us out of it! And Jesus takes His withdrawal, to serve as his springboard to full-on ministry. Jesus faces His sadness not just to gather himself, but to gather His people, which is why we hear of his positive response of calling helpers, naming His apostles. John's arrest and soon to come death serve as catalysts to inaugurate Jesus' response of Kingdom ministry. He enters the chamber, or like a bow's strings pulled back, withdraws, to for the purpose of targeting our world's needs.

His first steps are gathering a people, calling Peter, Andrew, James & John – fishermen, but Jesus expands their skill set, activating their work to higher purpose when He calls them to now (Mt 4:19) “Fish for men.” They were used to small fish, but Jesus has something greater for them, ‘ to come help Him **net** a people – draw in a kingdom – people for serving God in the kingdom. They hear and answer by setting aside their previous work to follow Him. Jesus does that. When we serve Him, serve God’s interests (the Kingdom), or serve His will & live His Way, then everything takes on lighter dimensions (**light** as in a release of our heavy personal burden--trying to do ourselves alone--but also **light** as in reflective of a clearer meaning-purpose-higher intention) I’m not just fishing around, but I am being caught myself in something greater, glorifying God by using any talent I have for the good of somebody else. That is the Kingdom-serving God, not selfishly ourselves. That is hearing Jesus’ call – and answering it – He wants us wherever we are, to be a vessel of His grace, to pass to someone the good that God alone brings to us. This is Good News. Yes, it is specifically the gospel-word message of ‘His redemption of our sin’, but it is also bears such fruit and gives Him glory as we act more and more like Him in our works, by our Christ-anointed relations/conduct with everyone else. That’s His/our light shining in the darkness!