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Matthew 4:12-23

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

John the Baptist gets arrested. That is how our scripture passage begins today: with Jesus hearing about John's arrest. We the readers of Matthew's gospel don't yet know *why* John was arrested. Matthew will give us that information later in his gospel. But we do know *who* arrested him. The Roman Empire. This empire ruled the region of Palestine with cruelty and terror. Say something Rome didn't like—you could land in prison. Step out of line in any way—you could get nailed to a cross. Rome's control was oppressively present on a daily basis. Everything you produced, from the crops you grew on the land to the fish you took out of the sea, would be subject to extreme taxation. Nearly everyone lived in poverty. Hunger and starvation and diseases born from malnutrition and poverty were commonplace. And the Empire didn't care. What the Empire cared about was securing power and wealth.

John the Baptist gets arrested by the Empire. We will learn later in Matthew's gospel, that John is arrested because he voiced criticism against Herod. Herod had taken his own brother's wife for himself and John the Baptist had said, "that's not okay." And for that criticism, Herod has John arrested. And eventually, Herod will behead John.

Our passage today starts with John's arrest, with the Empire flexing its cruel and oppressive muscles. Look what I can do! Nobody can stop me! Or so it thinks. But Rome was not the only empire around. Because upon learning about John's arrest, another empire strikes back.

"Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he . . . began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" John's arrest becomes the catalyst that launches

Jesus' public ministry. The Empire's cruelty, the Empire's oppression, cannot go unchallenged. And so Jesus begins proclaiming that a different empire is at hand: the kingdom of God. The Greek word used here for "kingdom" can be translated as "empire," or "reign," or "kingdom." In direct response to the Roman Empire's arrest of John, Jesus begins preaching about and demonstrating the power of a radically different empire—God's empire.

According to Jesus, God's empire is not some far away domain. It's not something you get to enjoy only when you die. It's not something you wish will arrive one day. According to Jesus, God's empire has come near. It's right among us. And as we see with Jesus, God's empire is already confronting all those other empires that lay claim to the world's people.

Normally, when empires challenge each other, when empires clash, we expect to see people take up weapons against one another. We expect to see violence. Notice, however, the way Jesus demonstrates the Empire of God.

Where the Roman Empire had worn people down, where the Roman Empire had brought disillusionment and despair, Jesus goes proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God—God's love, God's power, God's compassion, God's concern for the downtrodden. Jesus brings hope and good news. God's Empire strikes back.

To those sick with diseases arising from the poverty and deprivations brought on by the Roman Empire, Jesus went about "curing every disease and every sickness among the people." God's Empire strikes back.

Do see what Jesus is doing? Jesus' words, Jesus' healings are actions designed to *repair imperial damage*. Jesus confronts the imperial forces of cruelty and harm by repairing the damage and restoring people's lives using God's forces of compassion, hope, and love.

And then he calls disciples, “Come, follow me.” Come encounter God’s empire. Come join in striking back, not with weapons, but with God’s powerful tools of compassion, love, justice, and mercy. Think about this: Jesus shared the news of God’s empire with ordinary, powerless, impoverished people. And he empowered them to join forces with this radically different source of power at loose and at large in the world: the Realm, the Empire, the Kingdom of God’s love.

You and I are citizens of a lot of empires. There are forces and powers, and structures and systems, in which our lives are deeply embedded, many of which are harmful and destructive. We may feel powerless in the face of these forces. How do you even buy a T-shirt these days without unknowingly participating in some oppressive system of laborers across the globe, or without unwittingly participating in harmful repercussions on our environment? We want to repent, but can often feel powerless to know how.

There are other empires that are powerful forces *within* us as well. Like the empire of fear: fear of scarcity, fear of not measuring up to expectations. Like the empire of greed. I’m not talking just about the outsized, over-the-top greed we might see among celebrities or CEO’s, where we can point to with a sense of self-righteousness and proclaim, “Now *that’s* greed.” I’m talking about the garden variety of greed that takes root in the lives of middle class Americans. The desire for more becomes a type of empire in which we happily dwell as we answer that siren’s call to live as consumers rather than as disciples.

You and I are citizens of lots of empires and we can see in the world around us and we know from personal experience the *imperial damage* arising from such empires. But Jesus calls us to live as citizens of God’s empire. Jesus calls us, us ordinary people, to offer our lives over

to a different power. Come follow a different empire. Come join the ranks of those who use God's power to repair and restore damaged lives and spirits.

God's empire strikes back by using your ordinary life to display God's extraordinary power. God's empire strikes back whenever you inconvenience yourself on behalf of love. Or whenever you work to repair a broken relationship. God's empire strikes back when you forgive another. God's empire strikes back when you speak up about something that is wrong or unjust. God's empire strikes back when you are extravagantly generous with your money and your time for the betterment of others. Or when you make soup for another or offer a ride. Or live simply. God's empire strikes back when you vote in ways that considers the vulnerable and the powerless. Or volunteer in efforts that promote justice.

God fights back against the world's empires of harm and death and destruction by using you. You. You and your ordinary life and your ordinary daily activities become extraordinary, powerful forces for good, when you and I orient our lives after the way of Jesus and follow him into the Empire of Love.