

Mt. 4:12-23, Jan. 2017 Theological Geography

About a week and a half ago the Women's Group held our annual White Elephant Party at the home of Dawn and Dale, formerly Delores Jackson's home. The motto of W/ELCA being "what happens at W/ELCA stays at W/ELCA", I can't tell you too much about the party, except that there were 20 women there and we had a fabulous time. The downside, of course, was that after the party, my car slid off the driveway leaving there, nearly taking out a tree, and I needed assistance. But, most of you already knew that, right? I mean, word gets around in small community in the month of January when there's not a lot to talk about. I say this, because the very next day I mentioned it to someone who hadn't been there, and she laughed heartily and said, "Yeah, I heard. I also heard you were stuck earlier in the day in Roy Mattson's driveway." Well, that was so also. In my defense, that particular Tuesday was bad driving weather. However, in the case of Roy's driveway, as I told this individual, angels apparently gave me an invisible push, because I somehow got unstuck without help from anyone, against all odds, believe me. "Where were those angels that same night when you needed them?", the other woman joking asked me. Which caused me to realize that they had, indeed, shown up, they were just disguised as women from the W/ELCA group. A whole flock of angels descended on the car, bundled up in puffy jackets and mittens and attempting to assist by pushing ineffectually against the car or scattering dirt around my tires. Fortunately, one of these angels thought to call a more substantial cherubim, and an angel, who looked remarkably like Gary Ojard in winter garb, showed up, crammed himself into my small vehicle, and safely backed me out away from the tree and down the driveway. Makes for a good story, right? And the kind that is remembered. Every year now as that party

approaches, someone will say, “Remember how the Pastor got stuck backing down the driveway?”, and it will become a part of our small town history. People in Phil’s first call, 30 years ago, still talk about the time he ended up in a ditch on a perfectly dry and sunny day, and they had to pull him out with chains and pick up truck.

Now, why did I end up in my predicament in Dawn and Dale’s driveway? Partly because of my driving skills or the lack thereof, and partly because of slippery conditions. But, I am going to make the argument that the fundamental reason is geography. That house is set high up on a hill, because we live on a coastal shore, and most of our houses are on hills, one way or another. Their lovely home is particularly set up on a hill, and the driveway is long and narrow and steep. Geography. If we all lived instead on a flat plain in South Dakota, this probably wouldn’t have happened. Geography, as they say, is history. Or geography is destiny. Easy to overlook, but the geography of any given place pretty much determines who settles there, what they do, and how transportation and livelihoods happens. Much more than we realize, place shapes culture. True for most everyone and everything, and true also for our nation and the church.

Think about the way geography and history have played out in our nation this past week alone. Last Monday was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. As we think of that powerful prophetic voice, we think geographically; we think of the southern United States, where the struggle for civil rights was most dramatically played out. Of course, in the broadest strokes, the geography of the south had led to the cotton trade which led to slavery which led to the Civil War, which led to the ongoing struggle between Americans of African descent and European descent. And Dr. King gave one of his most famous speeches, the call for freedom speech where he repeatedly used the refrain, “let freedom

ring” at a geographical point that was the equivalent, some would say, of the “Mount Rushmore of the Confederacy”---Stone Mountain in Georgia. That was no coincidence; places evoke powerful memories and associations. Some places you can’t every get out of your system once you’ve been there; other places you can’t get away from soon enough. This place, Stone Mountain, had powerful associations with the Confederacy and slavery, and it was here that Dr. King took a stand for freedom.

The other geographically placed event that loomed large this past week was, of course, the inauguration of President Trump on Friday in Washington, D.C. In the traditional of our 231 year old noble experiment in democracy, our newly elected president was sworn in at our nation’s capital---in the same way that all the presidents before him have been. And protest marches happened there also, as protests have happened in the national mall area for centuries. The square miles that make up the National Mall are not the equivalent of any other square miles anywhere in our nation. That place matters for the ideals of our entire nation.

These are two examples of how important geography is in history and present events. This morning, in the context of our worship, I want to introduce you to a concept that was new to me in my reading this past week: *Theological Geography*. Theological Geography. The understanding that things happen where they do in Scripture and in our life for a God given reason and purpose. If, in fact, geography is history or destiny, then those times that places are held up in Scripture matter; they are held up for a reason. And we being where we are, is also a part of theological geography. *Where* we are matters for *who* we are. *Place* shapes *purpose*. *Vocation* is not separate from *location*. We will

certainly most appropriately consider this for ourselves, on this Sunday of our annual congregational meeting, but first let's consider it in relation to our Scripture lesson.

Picture in your minds the tiny, occupied country of Palestine, ancient Israel. It was never a large nation even in the glory days 1000 years before Christ, when David ruled a United Israel of 12 tribes bound together. But, by the time of Christ, it was tremendously diminished. Of those 12 tribes, 10 were lost over the centuries to neighboring powerhouses like Assyria or Persia or Babylon. Only a small fragment of the original nation remained relatively intact by the time of Jesus, and that small nation was occupied by a far more powerful force: the Roman Empire. Israel is rather long and narrow, and the southern portion was where the capital city of Jerusalem was located, along with Bethlehem, the city of David, as you recall. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David, as part of a series of prophecies---another instance of geographical theology. Likewise, he will die in the capital city of Jerusalem, which had a long history of difficult relationship with prophets, yet again a fulfillment of geographical theology. But in today's text, we are told that Jesus withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake. The lake being the Sea of Galilee. Not nearly as large as our inland sea, by the way, but a sea nevertheless. Why does Matthew, our Gospel writer, mention this at all? Because the *geography* is revealing of the *theology* of God's intent. Jerusalem and Bethlehem were in the southern part of Israel, sometimes called Judah; that's where the good Jews lived; that's where the happening place was, centered around the Temple and the capital, such as they were under Roman rule. Samaria was above this region, and Samaritans were considered to be not quite good Jews by the people of Judah—that's why the story of the Good Samaritan packed a

punch; the hero was one of those dubious, watered down Jews, a Samaritan. And further above that was Galilee, in which Nazareth, Christ's boyhood town was located. Further yet north in Galilee, in country that bordered Syrian provinces and where those of Jewish descent were considered very poor Jews if Jews at all, we would find the town of Capernaum. So Jesus begins his ministry in this unlikely and unholy backwater of ancient Israel. Not in the southern area of Judah, with the capital city and the Temple, where good Jews lived. But about as far north from it as he could go, in Capernaum, just barely inside of Syrian borders. Since geography determines destiny, what will these lake dwellers of Capernaum do for a living? We know that answer! They will fish! So, this determines the type of person Jesus will gather to himself as disciples. If he lived in Jerusalem, there's an excellent chance he'd be drawing learned and devout Jews in the best tradition of that time. But, he's living the heck out in Capernaum instead, where he's pretty much going to be calling poorly educated and more loosely observant Jewish anglers to be his followers. Not at all what one would expect, but God always behaves in surprising ways, and this is no exception.

Not only does the geography of this area color the type of followers Jesus will have; it makes a provocative statement of challenge about the dubious superiority claimed by that southern Temple region. And there is yet more theological geography at stake here. Because the Capernaum of Christ's time is located in the region of two of the 10 lost tribes of Israel, centuries earlier, which are mentioned in our text: Zebulun and Naphtali. These tribes fell to Assyria in 721 BCE, so about 750 years earlier than Christ lived. But the powerful impact of this loss remained. If that seems puzzling, think only of our relatively short span of history as a nation, but consider what it means to stand at

Gettysburg. Or at Little Big Horn. Or at the site of the Twin Towers in New York City. What is lost, places that symbolize death or defeat or sacrifice, can loom large in our national collective memory. So it was with Naphtali and Zebulun. In fact, a prophecy had been spoken about them by Isaiah: “Land of Zebulun, Land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles”---Isaiah has placed the location of his prophecy squarely geographically in this area of loss and defeat---and then he says, “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.” Isaiah places the dawning of God’s light in this dark and defeated region, and now all these centuries later, Christ will make his home there. Theological geography and the fulfillment of this prophecy, making the simple but powerful statement: God keeps promises.

How then might we apply this theological geography to ourselves, as we approach our annual meeting to celebrate the ministry that has been and anticipate that which is to come? If we accept that where we are matters for who we are---that place shapes purpose---that vocation is not separate from location---then what does that mean? It means that God intentionally and carefully has placed us right here, right now, to be little Christs for this very community and time.

Think with me about Gloria Dei, the church in Duluth that has been temporarily relocated from their downtown location to a building in Lakeside because of a fire. Will they decide to stay in Lakeside, which is after all, a “nicer” neighborhood than they had? Not at all! While the building was still smoldering, the congregation declared they would rebuild in their same location, because their ministry is all about that downtown neighborhood. That’s who they are! Their location determined their vocation!

Likewise, if God forbid, our church burned down, would we seriously consider if we should relocate to somewhere else? Maybe towards the east end of Duluth or the south edge of Two Harbors, where we'd be closer to larger centers of population? I don't think we'd consider that for a moment! I believe that while *our* building was still smoldering, we'd absolutely commit to rebuilding right where we are, in the heart of Knife River, because that's who we are: the heart of the community. God put us here to be that beating heart, and we are! Place shapes purpose. Theological geography!

And to the best of our ability, we have tried to be responsive to how location shapes vocation. The expansion of our building, the creation of the Memorial Garden, the putting in of the elevator, and the construction of the Columbarium are all responses to our community location. Our fishcake dinner celebrates our geography and culture, as does our participation in the Julebyen. Every effort we make to welcome our community inside these doors, every gesture of hospitality, openness, or involvement, is a way God uses us to further God's dream for this community and our church. This morning at our annual meeting we consider ways we can dream God's dreams and live out our calling for this particular place and time. Big Lake, slippery hills, rocky coastline; an assortment of families, retirees, professionals, laborers, artisans, anglers---this is our place, these are our people, this is our calling. How will we respond to God's calling to be Christ in this place? Amen.