

“Themes from an Overture”
Matthew 4:12–23
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
January 22, 2023

An overture to a musical work — a symphony, opera, or musical — is not only the first part of that work. It is music that introduces the themes that will be developed throughout the larger work, sometimes just part of a melody, harmonic progression, or rhythmic pattern. But the purpose is to introduce these themes so that the audience develops a familiarity with them and an interest in hearing more.

Other works of art and literature have overtures or something like them. Even sermons have introductions. You are hearing one now, and the point is to introduce and stir interest. Hopefully no one wants to leave, at least not yet! Biblical books, including the four Gospels have beginning sections like this is as well, such as the first eighteen verses of John which we call the prologue. As we join Matthew’s telling of the Jesus story today, we are past the overture proper, but we are still dealing with the introductory themes of Jesus’ ministry. We catch a glimpse of what lies ahead for him and all who follow him.

One theme we see in this overture concerns the element of danger. From the very beginning of this story, we realize we might be on the edge of our seats because this Messiah’s entire life will be lived in the context of many threats from religious and political authorities. We might say it is lived under the shadow of the cross, though this language hasn’t been introduced yet.

But before our reading today, we know that Herod questions the Magi in an effort to get to Jesus, and they have to return home by another way to avoid their own danger. We know that Jesus’ parents have to take him to Egypt when Herod has all the children of a certain age in Bethlehem killed in an effort to get Jesus. And we know that when they come back to their homeland, they have to go to Galilee because Archelaus is ruling in Judea in place of his father Herod.

Jesus hasn't even crossed the religious leaders yet, but he has stirred up Roman authorities simply by being born, and today's reading from Matthew 4 begins by noting that when Jesus hears that John the Baptizer has been arrested, he withdraws to Galilee. He leaves Nazareth and makes his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulon and Naphtali, fulfilling the ancient prophecy of Isaiah that the people of that region who sat in darkness would see a great light.

In the time of that writing, another empire, Assyria, oppressed the Jewish people. Now Rome is doing so. Jesus goes to this region because the threat to him there is less now, but he will not always avoid danger. Most of his life, he will walk straight into danger if his calling requires him to do so. This eventually leads to the cross. So, while he chooses to avoid danger now, the central theme is simply to note the ubiquitous nature of danger and risk in Jesus' life and ministry.

The message for us is that we can expect danger and risk if we are following Jesus. In the established church, particularly in American culture, we seem more interested in preserving the status quo than following any path or calling that might involve risk. The most important considerations are safety and keeping the peace, and while these can be noble concerns, the safest place to be, from an Eternal perspective, is in the center of God's will, and a superficial peace that neglects the Gospel calling to love and justice isn't worth keeping.

Sometimes we encounter danger in the natural process of reaching out to people in need. I think of Emile Sam-Peal, the former head of the Baptist Convention of Liberia who left his homeland in the 1990s with his wife and young daughter, walking in the night to the Ivory Coast, because at that point of the Civil War, pastors and Imams who were working for peace were being killed by the warlords. They made it to the U.S. only for Emile to volunteer for work the church I served in Richmond did in one of the most violent neighborhoods in our nation. Our people feared for his life, but Emile could not deny his calling.

We take risks when we go to Honduras or Kenya or Romania or Ukraine in the past. We take risks when we try to help people in need in this community, even in our clothing ministry. Risks are almost always involved when we make ourselves vulnerable enough to help others.

We can also encounter risks if we choose to speak up for others. I think of Civil Rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth who said that if we are not getting in trouble at times, like Moses confronting Pharaoh, speaking truth to power, we are not being faithful. I had a colleague in Danville, Virginia who lost his job because he tried to convince a church to welcome persons of color in the 1990s! I know a Pakistani pastor who risked his life by speaking up for a young girl wrongfully incarcerated.

Speaking up for others, like seeking to help people in need, can involve various kinds of danger. We don't have to be foolish, some risks are not necessary, but there is no way to follow Jesus without encountering some danger along the way.

Another theme we see in our extended overture is the centrality of teaching, preaching, and healing. Matthew says Jesus goes throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and sickness among the people. It is not an isolated claim. It is a summary statement, like many others in the Gospel accounts, that is surrounded by story after story about what and how Jesus teaches and preaches, and who he heals of what.

He teaches about kindness and compassion, love and justice, forgiveness and peace. He uses insightful parables and witty sayings to convey grace and truth. He preaches about the kingdom of heaven. And he heals the sick and the blind, the deaf and the lame, the leper and all who have been brokenhearted, marginalized, and excluded. We catch a glimpse of what lies ahead in this part our reading. It is a summary of what Jesus does first and foremost, and it is a foreshadowing of the wonderful things that lie ahead for Jesus.

It is also a concise statement of what we are called to be about in the church. Teaching is central, as is preaching — we will come back to that work in a few moments. In his book *The Christian Pastor* pastoral care founder Wayne Oates said that teaching is the central task of pastoral ministry, and by implication, also the church.

One might have thought a pastoral counselor would have argued for care being the central task, and Dr. Oates valued it highly, but he insisted that teaching lies at the heart of everything we do — preaching,

care, mission work, advocacy, everything! Even in a hospital room or at a graveside, we are helping others understand more about who God is — eternal, kind, and all-embracing — and who they are — beloved children of God who cannot be separated from God’s presence and love.

There are formal settings where we know we are teaching and learning, as in Sunday School and during Wednesday night programs. But all of life is a laboratory of learning and an opening to teach others about God. And teaching lies at the heart of everything we do.

Healing is also a central calling of the church, the healing of hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits. There is no magical connection between faith and healing. There is no guarantee that the faithful who pray just right will get well. It may seem like Jesus heals everyone. He does not. He becomes weary at times by immensity of need and has to withdraw from the crowds. And everyone he heals will one day get sick again and die.

But healing in different forms does take place and we can participate in it by being with people and letting them know they are not alone, praying for people and adding our love to God’s, supporting people so that they can summon their own inner resiliency. My doctor and close friend in Winston-Salem used to say that medicine is the art of amusing the patient until nature takes care of the healing. There is truth in that. Medicine helps in other ways, but our bodies, minds, and spirits have their own capacity to heal, and this capacity must be tapped into for any of us to be well, truly well. Faith helps us to pursue wellness.

So, in the extended part of Matthew’s overture we have read, we see that danger will be an ongoing part of Jesus’ experience and ours, and we see that teaching, preaching, and healing are central to Jesus’ calling and ours. One final theme we see is the role of the kingdom, reign, or realm of heaven, also called the kingdom of God. This is what Jesus preaches — that the kingdom has come near in him. This is what lies at the center of the prayer he teaches us to pray — thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. That’s what the kingdom is, God’s will being done.

It is not a nice little addition to life, the spiritual equivalent to a dietary supplement or new exercise. It is a complete change of

allegiance. Jesus is Lord now, not Caesar, which is why Jesus faces danger so often. Nothing comes before God and God's ways.

The four fishermen Jesus calls in our text are called to follow him, and when they do so, they leave everything else behind. New Testament scholar Warren Carter notes that it's not just their families and community that they leave. They are probably under contract with the Roman Empire, one that allows them to fish and obligates them to supply a certain quality of fish (*Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, p. 121). Their change of allegiance disrupts Rome's economic interests, even if in a small way.

There are consequences to our shift of allegiance to God too, and thus dangers and risks, but there is also joy in the fulfillment of our calling. When we decide that nothing comes before our loyalty to God, there are inevitable tensions even with other good loyalties, but as Jesus says, we cannot serve God and wealth; we cannot put God first and also put career, family, team, party, or nation first. Jesus proclaims the nearness of God's realm at the beginning of his ministry all the way to his end on a cross and post-resurrection appearances. God and God's ways always come first for him, as they do for us.

I heard a preacher say there are three parts to a good sermon. First, have a strong introduction, something to grab people's attention. Second, have an even stronger conclusion, drive home sacred truth in a way that will be embraced and embodied. Third, say as little as possible in between. Well, two out of three isn't bad...

The Jesus story checks all the boxes. The introduction or overture sets the stage. The ending resolves many cosmic struggles and provides hope in the face of suffering. And while the in-between part may seem long, it only covers necessary ground. There are reasons why it is the greatest story ever told and we continue to live it today. In the face of all opposing views and threats, we say — thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, in, through, and beyond our lives. May it be so, amen!