

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

January 22, 2023

**Right Here. Right Now.**

Dr. Jo Forrest



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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: February 5, 2023

History comes alive for us through the stories of very particular people who faced threats and took bold risks. If they could do that then, what might we do, today?

Ages ago, the sons of Jacob, Zebulun and Naphtali, received territory allotments around the Sea of Galilee. Real men raised their families in that region.

Today, you can walk the muddy shores, watch the fishing boats and imagine their attempt to settle the land. When you gaze at the hills on the other side of the water, you can see how easily foreign nations could threaten this bucolic landscape.

Over the generations, one power after another swooped in to inflict tyranny.

Long before the time of Christ, the prophet Isaiah called the descendants of those brothers to hold on to their moral compass. God promises, to those people, to deliver a savior.

By the dawn of the first millennia, that hope barely breathed in the people who were now oppressed by Rome. This is where the writer Matthew anchors Jesus' ministry. Not in some abstract way, but amidst particular people.

With this context, please pray with me before we hear the good news...

*Dear God, you made promises long ago to people who felt abandoned and who drifted. We understand what it is like to think our lives do not make a difference. Or wonder if we can change the way things are. You know this doubt. We ask you to tune our hearts to hear your word in this story and find your presence in our midst, today. Amen.*

Matthew 4:13-25

Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup>so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

<sup>15</sup>“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of  
the gentiles—

<sup>16</sup>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.”

<sup>17</sup> From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

<sup>18</sup> 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 fishers. <sup>19</sup> And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

<sup>21</sup> 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 Jesus called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat -- and their father -- and followed him.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup> So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. <sup>25</sup> And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

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Back in November, residents of Kyiv moved about normally in the light of day. If the word “normal” could ever apply to a city under siege. As the sun began to set earlier and earlier, merchants scurried to pack the assortment of embroidery and war memorabilia they tried to sell. By nighttime, rolling black outs suspend any sense of normalcy.

Residents learned to no longer stock refrigerators with food beyond what could be immediately consumed, a constant reminder of what “perishable” means.

Walking Kyiv at night created an eerie contrast between light and dark, playing tricks on their eyes. Strangers passing on the street can sometimes stir apprehension amid shadows. So they adapted. People placed LED lights on their dog’s collars for nighttime walks. Musicians pierced the silence with serenades, played from memory. All ages helped one another find their way home from the common water well as they strain to carry jugs in the moonlight.

Residents admitted their moods would slip from fierce resolve to anger, all the while laced with fear. Determined, Ukrainians tried to see the best things possible, and a future without Putin’s threats. Some residents remarked at how in the



darkness the stars seem brighter and the moon more brilliant.<sup>1</sup>

Their lives witness to the truth: even in the depth of despair we all possess the desire and capacity to give whatever we can, with what we have, to make our world a better place. The people of Ukraine, walking in darkness and the shadow of death, stand as modern-day examples of the early followers of Jesus who navigate towards his light.

The writer of Matthew's gospel speaks to ethereal light and peppers the story with details for us to know that Jesus appears in human life, not as a far-fetched, mythic figure. Nor is the call to follow him some idyllic fable.

At the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus pursues Peter and Andrew. These brothers languished under a Roman caste system designed to hold the Galileans in their assigned social roles; poor, laborers, and without voice or influence.

This inhumanity must have gnawed at them each time they fished. Any time they hauled more than enough to feed their families; their fees increased. They were caught up in a

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Santora, "A City Lit Up With Nightlife Is Suddenly Draped in Darkness," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2022.

scheme for foreign leaders to profit by taxing local fishers' profits.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew, they dropped their nets to follow.

Then Jesus saw James and John, also flesh and blood men, and called them from their only means of income, a boat, and their father, Zebedee, to an unknown future.

Their bravery at that time and place, changed the trajectory of human history. Each brought what they had learned in their trade to employ the same skills for a bigger purpose: to bring God's heavenly realm to light on earth.

Jesus called them not from this world, he called them more deeply into the world, especially into those parts where fear, loss, suffering, bitterness and hate crush peoples' lives.

With him, they applied everything they knew of labor and risk, and gathering fish, for a greater good. From this story and the other disciples, we know Jesus calls those already up to their elbows each day in the rhythm of commerce and family, not the idle. He calls people across the spectrum in the community who have something to say and a particular skill to give, not those at the center of importance. Jesus calls the

spiritually hungry and curious, not necessarily the religiously trained.

His invitation comes in the midst of work with an urgency that cannot be ignored, not some long, drawn out interview. Jesus calls those who value life and trust in their guts they would rather work for God's will than any other purpose.

What then should we make of this message today at Westminster in Upper St. Clair? Rome doesn't threaten us. Bombs don't rain down on us. We enjoy the freedom to speak out against injustice and corrupt policies without fear.

Just because our lives are not threatened does not diminish the urgency of Jesus' call. The future of his church depends upon our bold commitment, today, and not some past generation's risk or future heirs' burden.

Let's lift the covers.

In early January, the officers you elected gathered over two days to pray, work, and plan.

On Friday evening, we worshiped in the darkness of this sanctuary, confided our individual desires and fears about the

new year. Then we each lit a candle in prayer, setting the table ablaze with individual lights.

Saturday morning opened our eyes with the sobering trends from fresh research. In the US, belief in God and trust in a community of faith steadily sinks as apathy grows towards faith regardless of denomination and faith traditions.

It is heartbreaking to see the paradox of a declining interest in church and at the same time increasing loneliness and anxiety about a meaningful life in our nation. As more people turn from God and those who follow Christ remain silent, the problem festers.

Those who planned the retreat asked for thorough review of our financial condition. We pulled out the spreadsheets to explain how we fund operations. Although many who pledged for 2023 committed to give more, thank you, we fell short of the stewardship goal. We need to develop new ways to invite people to give to close the gap.

We got in the weeds of rising costs – the actual utility expense for 2022 blew through the \$76,000 budgeted amount to end at a \$92,000 total. Westminster feels the pinch from heating bills just like everyone else in the community. You will hear

more about the annual budget at our congregational meeting in February.

These are the cultural headwinds blowing against us as we put our flesh and blood plans towards our priorities. How do we tell this good news when all around us others will say “why bother” or shrug indifference. What we do is hard. It can be risky to follow Jesus in a world that ignores his call to love God and neighbor.

Against this gloomy outlook across the country, we took stock of the steady progress across the board at Westminster. Kids bring kids. Members bring friends. Visitors return. All ages offer hands-on service. Music soars. You tend broken hearts with care. We baptized as many children as the number of saints we laid to rest.

After this candid look at the facts, we broke into small groups. Groups of elders and deacons were asked to imagine placing into a time capsule the very best of Westminster from 2023. What do we have today or need to have in order for this place to thrive?

That’s when a cacophony of voices and ideas flowed. The holy spirit animated each group. To the very real challenges ahead, individuals spoke from their particular point of view of

Westminster's shining stars and what we can do. They created page after page of tangible ministries that bring to light Christ's presence – right here, right now. As practical tasks took shape, people raised their hands to say, "I'll do it."

They see the needs in this community to be a place of love and acceptance. The overwhelmed single parent. The anxious teen. The curious child. The newly retired with energy. Our steeple rises only as a reflection of the work of our hands and hearts.

No one imagines a smooth road ahead, but the officers you called love this church deeply and will not shy away. They bring the gifts of imagination and grit of persistence. You called women and men who follow Christ with a passion for his kingdom to grow. And it is not theirs alone to do for when ordinary people make the bold choice to say "yes" to Jesus the whole world lights up. Join with them in this hard and holy work.





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