
Learning to Swim in Deep and Turbulent Waters

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A

“The times they are a-changin’.”

Can you hear Bob Dylan’s voice? Thin, raspy, almost untrained. It sounds as if the message matters more than the singer himself. Dylan was singing into fearful and anxious times—the 1960s, marked by the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. Faith in institutions was shifting. Faith in one another was under strain. They were anxious, unsettled years.

You can hear in that song, I think, something of John the Baptist—especially when Dylan sings, “You better start swimmin’ or you’ll sink like a stone.” The warning is unmistakable. Change is coming, and neutrality is not an option.

John the Baptist speaks with that same urgency. His message is familiar: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Repent. But when John says repent, what he is really saying is get ready. Something decisive is about to happen. The Lord is coming, and you must change in order to receive him.

Dylan, however, goes a step further. He insists that the change is not merely approaching—it is already underway. The water is rising. It is deep, and it is turbulent. What he does not do is tell us how to swim. He leaves us with the stark warning—“You better start swimmin’ or you’ll sink like a stone”—and with the unanswered question: How, exactly, are we meant to swim?

It will not surprise you to learn that I think Jesus answers that question.

Interestingly, Jesus begins his ministry using the very same words as John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” But he means something slightly different. He does not mean, Prepare yourselves for something that will happen in the future. He means, “Pay attention, because it has already happened.”

Do you hear the difference?

Jesus is not asking us to prepare for the absence of God. He is asking us to prepare for the presence of God. And that difference changes everything. It means we do not ask, “What would Jesus do?” — as if we were looking back at a historical figure for moral guidance. Instead, we ask, “What is Jesus doing now?”

That is our faith: that God is present—in us and around us. And through prayer, attention, and community, we learn to recognize that presence, align ourselves with it, and walk into the world shaped by it.

So it should not surprise us that Jesus repeatedly withdraws. Have you noticed how often he retreats to the hills to pray? It is as if even Jesus must realign himself with the Father in order to walk faithfully in the world. That detail matters.

It becomes even more intriguing when we look closely at the quotation from Isaiah that Matthew uses in the Gospel. Isaiah says, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” But Matthew renders it slightly differently: “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.”

In both cases, the light is God’s doing. But Matthew shifts the posture. In Isaiah, the people are walking in darkness. In Matthew, they are sitting in it. And I think that difference matters.

Matthew suggests that before anyone can walk anywhere at all—before anyone can move faithfully into the world—they must first stop. Sit. Stay still long enough for the light to find them. The light does not come because they are moving well. It comes while they are sitting in darkness.

That feels true to experience, doesn't it? We often want to act our way out of darkness. We want to fix it, solve it, outpace it. But Matthew seems to say that transformation begins not with motion, but with attention. The people who sat in darkness saw a great light.

And only then—only after the light has been received—can there be faithful walking.

That matters to us. We are living in fearful and anxious times of our own. Our institutions clamor for trust. We increasingly seek safety among people who look like us and think like us. The question is not whether we should act in the world—we should. We should pursue justice. We should speak truth to power. We should resist cruelty and falsehood wherever we encounter them.

But that will not be enough.

We must begin by sitting. Sitting in the presence of God. Sitting in prayer. Sitting in silence. Sitting long enough for the light to reach us where we actually are. Because we cannot walk in the light if we have not allowed the light to meet us in our darkness.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” is, first of all, a call to prayer—a call to recognize God's presence so that we may align ourselves with it and walk in the world as bearers of that light.

Here, I think, is one of the key differences. When we respond only to John's call—when repentance becomes primarily about fighting injustice—we often find ourselves anxiously engaged. We look for certainty. We look for safety. We begin to define ourselves by being right, by clearly identifying our enemies.

But when we are sitting in the light—when we are attending to the presence of God—we become willing to be changed. Do you see the difference? The work no longer begins with changing others, no matter how justified we may feel. It begins with allowing ourselves to be changed by God.

And when we start there, something shifts. When we walk into the world, we do so as witnesses to God's presence. We are different. And people can feel that difference.

That, I think, is the difference between the prophetic call of John and the prophetic call of Jesus. It is not What would Jesus do? as if he were a figure of the past. It is What is Jesus doing? as if he were a living presence with whom we must align ourselves.

That is what we do in church. That is what happens when we sing hymns, read Scripture, gather in community, and serve those in need. We are sitting in the light. We are aligning ourselves with God.

And you can tell when this is happening. You listen more carefully in meetings. You tolerate more ambiguity. You become willing to criticize those on your own side. Loyalty no longer requires ignoring the truth. You discover that you are able to love more fully—not because you are trying harder, but because you are paying closer attention to what Christ is already doing.

To ask what Christ is doing now is to learn how to love more creatively and more faithfully. That is where we begin. That is how we respond to the anxious provocations of our time.

Sometimes the most faithful response is to stand still. And that stillness can have more power to change the world than any angry declaration we might shout.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.”

Sit in the light, so that you may walk in the light.

Amen.