

Matthew 4:12-23

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

This week, Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation told the story of a grim moment in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life. He had been receiving 30 to 40 threatening letters and phone calls a day, and the strain was beginning to wear on him.

He began to pray. "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. . . . I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

Then, he wrote, "It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world.'

"I tell you I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roar. I've felt sin breakers dashing trying to conquer my soul. [If you know the old hymn "Never Alone" you know that "sin breakers" is an allusion to sin being like waves threatening to sink the boat.] But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me alone. At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."¹

On Monday, we commemorated Dr. King's birthday with a federal holiday. His legacy, his example, has never seemed more trenchant. "One night at a mass meeting, I found myself saying, 'If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence. I urge you to continue protesting with the same dignity and discipline you have shown so far.'"

¹ *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (qtd in Center for Action and Contemplation Daily Meditations, Jan 22, 2026)

But there is a logic of inevitability around stories like King's. Because we know how things turned out, it seems as if they were always going to turn out the way they did. On the one hand, King was assassinated. On the other, the movement he stood for was able to achieve lasting changes in the treatment of Black people and workers of all races. However, at the moment of his middle-of-the-night prayer, he could be no more certain of that outcome than he was certain of his life.

It would be equally easy to weave a logic of inevitability around Jesus' call to his first disciples and their answer. Of course when Jesus calls you you put away everything else to follow, right? Don't you? Haven't you? I confess that in my life I mostly have not. Not that I wasn't willing. Only that I dithered and hesitated, wondering whether I was hearing the call correctly, or what I was supposed to do with it. And especially not in the everyday call to discipleship that is manifested in all of our lives. We do not know the road ahead of us.

So what's going on with Simon and Andrew, James and John? Are they such remarkable people? Or how is it that they instantaneously seem to throw down their nets and their mortgages, their families and their other responsibilities to follow Jesus?

I don't think it's because of a secret sauce or a magic wand. Given their subsequent story arc with Jesus, the disciples are not particularly spiritual to start with. They're not chosen for their good looks or sparkling wit. They are not—and this is the point—extraordinary. They are just like you and me. Just exactly like us. So what is the deal? Why are they so ready to go?

We might get a clue from the first part of our gospel reading:

“Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested. . . .” Things are *going down* over there on the Jordan. Herod's high-handedness has raised shockwaves among the people. And John, you'll remember, has had a significant following. Now, suddenly, gone. Matthew does not spend time on Jesus' internal response. But from this time forward, Jesus takes up John's mantle and begins to use his signature line: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.”

The new disciples are willing to follow Jesus because he is willing to lead them—out of the kingdom of oppression and into a new way of living. But it takes some kind of chutzpah, doesn't it, when your relative and predecessor is arrested and unjustly imprisoned, to claim that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near?

And yet that is what Jesus is insisting here. That the reign of heaven comes near, not in the places that are bucolic and at peace. The reign of heaven comes near to those who are suffering, who are laboring under the flags of injustice and inhumanity. God comes near to those like Dr. King, who are calling out in the night, scared nearly out of their wits by death threats and doubts.

I have seen the video of the man federal agents shot yesterday. Alex Pretti was an intensive care nurse for the VA. He was face down on the ground when he was killed, not “brandishing a weapon.” Like many, I am tired and distraught. We're all “down here trying to do what's right.” We are all “at the point where [we] can't face it alone.” Can we dare to hope that the kingdom of heaven comes near?

Today's Isaiah text is familiar to us from the Christmas lectionary—“the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Yet in its context it is notable for addressing people who are still in captivity. They are still living in deep darkness, but the prophet insists that God has kindled the light of hope. And now we see this light most profoundly in the cross—as God suffers with us and all who are oppressed by sickness, sin, or evil. Jesus calling us into the reign of heaven right outside our door.

Nadia Bolz-Weber showed me a glimpse of this yesterday when I needed it most. I'll share her story in case you can use it too.

“My best friend lives in the Twin Cities and told me that last week, ICE was setting up in the parking lot behind a Lutheran church, not realizing the quilters were there that day. The women confronted them, asking if they were proud of what they were doing - and suggested that, if so, they should go set themselves up in front where more people could see them.

“They left.

“So maybe serving a heavy world doesn’t mean absorbing its full weight. Maybe it means setting down what isn’t ours, and lifting the one small, specific thing that is. Tending a body. Telling the truth. Making enough soup to feed yourself—and pouring a little extra into a jar to drop off for a neighbor. Showing up to a demonstration even if you’ve never been to one. Loving fiercely where your feet actually are. Taking a video of anything you see that’s unjust, even if your hands are shaking. Resisting despair and all its empty promises.

“That won’t save everything. But it will save something. And that is how we keep going.

May God guide us all to know what is ours to do; activists, grandmothers, lawyers, clergy, teachers, children, and of course, quilters.”²

I am grateful to God for all of you who keep on keeping on. Amen.

² Nadia Bolz-Weber, *The Corners* for Jan. 24, 2026