

“A Light in the Darkness” (Matthew 4:12-23)
Third Sunday after Epiphany; January 26, 2020

Our gospel text this morning takes us to the beginning of Jesus public ministry. He has been baptized by John in the Jordan and tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Now, Matthew tells us, having heard that John the Baptist – the last and greatest of the prophets – has been arrested and imprisoned for publicly condemning King Herod for marrying his brother’s wife, Jesus leaves his hometown of Nazareth in Judea and moves to Capernaum in Galilee.

There are two things here we should note. One, because John’s ministry was preparatory to Jesus, Jesus waits until John’s ministry is over before officially beginning his own. And, two, he doesn’t stay in Nazareth. He moves to Galilee and makes his home base in Capernaum a town along the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew knows and loves his Old Testament, and is particularly interested in passages that apply to Jesus. He writes his gospel to show his readers that Jesus is the Messiah to which the Old Testament prophets point. Therefore, the reason Matthew gives for Jesus’ move is that it fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that the Messiah would come to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali – Galilee of the Gentiles – to enlighten those who live in darkness and bring life to those who live in the shadow of death.

One of my favorite things is to go to the beach just before dawn. Watching the sun rise, its rays tearing away the curtain of darkness and illuminating the world with light, is one of the most beautiful things in nature. And it’s a beautiful thing when Matthew – quoting the prophet Isaiah – describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as a dawning light in the darkness.

And Galilee certainly was a dark place. Its location had always made it vulnerable. Because it was a passageway down to Egypt and Africa, it was susceptible to foreign invasions from the north. When Isaiah first made his prophecy, this area which comprised the northern tribes of Israel were under rule of the Assyrian empire. Isaiah saw all around him the darkness caused by this tyrannical enemy. That’s when he spoke these words of hope and promise. One day the gloomy darkness of oppression would be shattered by the Light of God.

Of course, Assyria was not the last nation to oppress the region of Galilee. This province bore the scars of centuries of invasions. In Jesus’ day, it was occupied by the Romans. So it was, first of all, a land of political darkness.

It was also a land of spiritual darkness. After leaving the slavery of Egypt and settling into the Promised Land, the original tribes had never been completely successful in expelling the native Canaanites. So the area was filled with inhabitants whose worship of pagan gods was a constant source of influence and temptation for God’s people.

From the beginning, the population of Galilee was mixed. That never changed. Later, when the majority of the Jewish population was taken away into exile, strangers had settled into the land, bringing a larger injection of foreign blood, along with their idolatry and immorality. The Jews returning from exile were met with the challenge of maintaining their devotion to God

and following their Jewish customs in a mixed land of unclean ethnic groups. That's why Isaiah called it the Galilee of the Gentiles. It seems there had always been a spiritual darkness that permeated the region of Galilee.

Poor health also brought darkness into the land. How many stories from the gospel do we read of large crowds bringing their sick to Jesus? There were certainly a lot of health issues. New Testament scholar, Warren Carter, helps us understand why. He says that Roman imperial structures and practices were simply bad for people's health. Seventy to ninety percent of those living under the Romans experienced varying degrees of poverty.

Not only were social stresses high, but the water and the limited amount of food were both of poor quality. Diseases associated with poor nutrition, such as blindness and muscle weakness, were widespread. A lack of immunity led to conditions like cholera. These kinds of diseases were a death blow in a world that required physical labor for survival.

Yet, this place of sickness, this place of political and spiritual darkness is where Jesus decided to set up his home base and begin his ministry. And I think this is good news for you and me. Jesus could have begun his ministry in Jerusalem – the home of the temple and a place filled with educated men who had the potential to make great disciples – but he chose the place most looked down on by the people of Jerusalem.

He came to shine the light of God's grace in the darkest – and most unexpected – of places. He came to people who were the most hopeless, whose lives were most messed up, who were suffering with all kinds of health issues. Jesus made it his primary mission to visit those who didn't know God, didn't know the way to God, or had no hope that God would ever have compassion on them. And that's what Jesus does today. He still comes to those who feel like they are blindly stumbling through life, who don't feel happy or healthy or successful, who are hopeless, helpless, or on the verge of despair.

Jesus once said, *It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.* That's why he comes to people who are broken, people wandering in the fog of doubt and uncertainty, people who feel left out, alone, abandoned. So, if you're broken in body or spirit, if you've messed up life so badly that you don't think it can be put back together, or if you feel like you are wandering through life without aim or purpose, rejoice because a Light has dawned. Jesus comes – and is here – for you and me.

Once in Galilee, Matthew tells us that Jesus begins preaching. Jesus must have been a wonderful preacher. Throughout the gospels we hear his eloquent words. You know, I'll bet no one ever fell asleep when Jesus preached. That has to be one of the greatest fears for a pastor – that someone fall asleep during his or her sermon.

I remember one time it happened to me. I was only about five minutes into my sermon when I saw someone fall sound asleep. My heart sank. Driving home after the service, I turned to Susan and told her how disappointed I felt. *Honey*, I said, *you just have to get to bed earlier on Saturday nights.*

So Jesus comes preaching – and it’s the same message John the Baptist preached. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.* Only now, it’s being preached by the Messiah himself.

We will explore the theme of repentance during Lent, but it simply means *to turn around – to change the direction of the way we are living.* It is to recognize the darkness of our hearts and confess that we are sinful. *For the kingdom of heaven has come near,* Jesus says. The Light of God’s love and compassion has come to shine the light of God’s forgiving grace into our sin-darkened hearts, to illuminate hearts stuck in the cycle of sin. He comes to heal, to fix, to solve the source of all our problems, to defeat the darkness and save us from it. And that’s what he would do. On the cross, he would swallow the darkness of sin and overcome the shadow of death. And on Easter morning, the light of his resurrection would destroy their power forever. Thanks be to God!

But Jesus needs disciples to share in his mission of spreading the light. Walking on the shore by the Sea of Galilee, he sees Simon Peter and Andrew casting their nets into the sea. We can’t assume that this is the first time he has seen them – or they him. Perhaps they had talked with Jesus already and have a sense of the light he brings. But this particular encounter would ask them to place their futures in Jesus’ hands.

Follow me, he invites them. And amazingly, they respond immediately, leaving their nets to follow. They don’t text home to say, *Honey, I won’t be home for dinner. I’m going to tag along with this Jesus guy and see what he is all about.* No, they go immediately. A similar invitation is then offered to James and John, who immediately leave their boat with their father, Zebedee, to follow Jesus.

There must have been something so provocative about Jesus’ invitation that these four men are willing to take such a risk. Perhaps it is because he provides additional information that resonates with something they already know. *I will make you fish for people.* Jesus speaks to something that is close to their hearts. He uses a part of them – their fishing skills – to inspire them to move forward and join him.

Extending his light to them, he invites them into a relationship to stay with him, to listen to what he teaches, to watch the things he does, to discover that God is coming close to shine his light on all people, and to learn how they will be entrusted with extending this light to the world.

It is interesting that Jesus chooses the men he does. They are not men of great scholarship, or influence, or wealth, or social background. They are ordinary, hard-working men whose future looks just like today – one of fishing. Still, these unlikely fishermen are the ones he calls, inviting them into the extraordinary story of salvation. And when these ordinary men give themselves to Jesus, the course of their future is changed.

The kind of disciples Jesus chooses tells me that he is interested in reaching ordinary, everyday people like you and me. It tells me that the kingdom of heaven is not just for the rich, the powerful, and the well-educated. It is available to every person under the sun. That’s the good news Jesus extended to his disciples and, in turn, the good news the disciples extended to the world: that the light of God’s grace shines on all.

God still calls people today. God calls you and me – the most unlikely of people – to step into his story of salvation and extend the light of his love into the darkness of our world. He calls us to bring the light of Christ to our own Galilee – to that corner of the world that only we could possibly reach. My prayer is that we will answer that call willingly and eagerly just like those four fishermen. It made a difference in their lives, and it will make a difference in ours.