

“The Great Light in the Darkness” (Text: Matthew 4:12-25)

January 22, 2023 – Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew writes that Jesus went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. He makes a note that Jesus is fulfilling the word of Isaiah who spoke long before Jesus was born. Isaiah prophesied that a great light would shine in the darkness for those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death. Isaiah speaks that this light would dawn upon the people beyond the Jordan, and Galilee of the Gentiles.

But what does Isaiah’s word mean? What do they look like? Where are Zebulun and Naphtali? Where is the land called “the way of the sea? What’s beyond the Jordan? Has Isaiah’s prophecy ended once and for all? Or does Jesus, this “Light,” still shine in the darkness today? Where is the darkness today? I pray this morning that we would all put our trust in Jesus Christ, the great light in the darkness.

In the first part of Matthew’s gospel lesson for the third Sunday after the Epiphany, we hear that Jesus, the great Light, withdrew into Galilee: Capernaum to be exact. Capernaum was in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Zebulun and Naphtali occupied the territory of Capernaum, west of the Sea of Galilee. It says that Zebulun, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, dwelled “at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon.” In Naphtali, many fortified towns and major trade routes came through this area which lies along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

You may ask: “Why mention these things pastor? Is this a history and geography lesson or a sermon?” Good questions. The reason I’m giving you this information is to show that the Father knows what he was doing when he sent his Son, the great Light, into the world, in particular the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali. Not only would these two territories be the hometown of four disciples, Andrew, Peter, James, and John of Capernaum, but these territories would be passed through by many other people. Thus, the great Light of the Father would dawn on many people beyond the Jordan. People from all over, many Gentiles, would make their way through these two territories and come across Jesus of Nazareth, the great Light in the darkness. And we see just that. We see Jesus dawning upon, not only the Jewish nation but the Gentile nations as well. They’re coming to the great Light and they don’t even know it. It’s as if Jesus is standing right in the way of the people of this world.

The great light shines in the darkness of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew continues to write in detail the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy about the great Light. He records, “**While walking 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 fishermen.**” Jesus calls these two men away from the way of fishing for fish in the sea, to the way of fishing for men in the sea of the world. Jesus also calls James and John to drop the way of the sea and pick up

the way of following the great Light. This immediate change from the way of the sea to the way of following Jesus was only made possible by Jesus breaking into the darkness of the four newly called disciples' hearts. Jesus the great Light called them to repentance by the brightness of his light, to turn from the way of the sea, and to immediately follow the Light that dawns a new kingdom of heaven. It's a kingdom that makes citizens of a new kingdom. It's a kingdom that will dwell in the darkness of every kingdom and territory of the world.

Matthew writes about the great light in the darkness throughout all of Galilee. But not only in all of Galilee, but Decapolis, Jerusalem, and beyond the Jordan, for people from these places were following him. Thus, Isaiah's words have taken on flesh and bone.

The great Light, Jesus Christ, shined the light of his gospel as he proclaimed repentance and the coming kingdom at hand. His Word and deeds of light permeated the darkness of the people, in order that they would turn to him and follow. He healed every darkened disease, affliction, epileptic, and paralytic. He even healed those who were possessed by demons. Not only did Jesus proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand, but he also demonstrated it. He invaded the bodies of those with diseases and afflictions and restored them and scattered the darkness away.

I want to ask the same questions I asked earlier. Has Isaiah's prophecy ended once and for all? Or does Jesus, this "Light," still shine in the darkness today? Where is the darkness today? Isaiah's prophecy is still ongoing. Jesus fulfilled the Word of Isaiah by taking on flesh and making his dwelling among the Jews and Gentiles. He also called 12 men to continue his ministry of bringing himself, the great Light, to the entire darkened world, where repentance and the forgiveness of sins will permeate the darkened places of man's heart. Also, these 12 were accompanied by many other men and women who follow the great Light of Christ. And these would call others to follow the Light.

On and on this goes until the day came when the Light called you. He dawned on you with the great Light of his Word. The Word that calls you to repentance, for the Light has come. He called you to the waters of baptism where he heals you by drowning your darkened heart and making you clean. He gives you a new heart and a clean conscience that follows the Light were ever he has you go.

This work from the Light is ongoing. Each day, our darkened hearts creep up out of the waters and tries to swim to shore. Our darkened hearts are unable to find our way to the Light. Our darkened hearts lead us to the shadow of death as Isaiah proclaims. This is why the work of the Light shining in the darkness is ongoing. Each and every day we must be called back to the waters of baptism where we're united to Christ in his death. His death upon the cross eradicated and did away with the darkness of your sins. And in his resurrection, you too have been brought up out of the waters in order to follow the Light into newness of life.

And since the ministry of the Light shining and dawning on people in darkness is still ongoing, you will find yourself bringing the great Light of the gospel and his kingdom to others in your various vocations. Notice that Jesus, the firstborn of this ministry of the way of fishing for men, went into the darkness to proclaim and save. Notice that Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, John, and all of his followers, to go into the darkened places.

So, what does that say for us? It means that we too are called to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in the darkened places of the world. The darkened places of the world have nothing to do with location. Rather, it's about the darkened places of men's hearts.

But before you do that dear friend, he provides you with his holy Meal. In this meal, you consume the Light that will go with you as you live, walk, proclaim, and continue the work of fishing for men. By physically eating and drinking this Meal, you join yourself with the Light that has come into the darkened world. It's your sustenance that strengthens you to follow the Light back out into the world of darkness to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom.

Now, first and foremost, we're called to bring the Light of the gospel to our own hearts. Yes, we still must have the Light permeate our darkened hearts that creep back into our minds and bodies. That's why we confessed and sought forgiveness this morning. We confess that we still sin. We confess that we still at times have dark thinking and deeds. But we repent and come back to the Light for forgiveness. Only after we've been healed, can we take up the call to bring that same Light to the places where people are in darkness.

These places that you're called to, where the darkened people are, will vary from person to person. Some might be in your own home. Some might be at your workplace, schools, or even your own neighborhood. Some of you might see them in this building throughout the week. Christ, our great Light, calls each one of us to shine him in every dark place. And since he longs for himself to shine in every single place of those found in darkness and death, he calls many of his people to bear witness to the Light. Rest assured that he has taken care of everything in accomplishing his mission to shine the great light in the darkness.

Pastor Jon Carpenter