

## Sermon for January 26, 2014 Epiphany 3

Isaiah 9:1-4 (NIV84)

### **Theme: The LORD is our Liberating Light!**

- 1) *Who rescued us from the shadow of death.*
- 2) *Who freed us from of our slavery to sin.*

*Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan--<sup>2</sup> The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.<sup>3</sup> You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.<sup>4</sup> For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.*

Imagine what life would be like as a slave. You would have no freedom. You could only do what your master told you. You would have no hope or future.

Now, imagine life, not only as a slave, but as a slave to a tyrant. Imagine being pushed around and beaten if you merely seemed to go against your master's wishes. Imagine the constant threat of torture and death hanging over you throughout your life.

It's hard for us to even imagine such a horrible life being possible, and yet many people – even in our own country's past - have lived the very life I described. Many people in the world are physically living that life today. And it can be said that all people who don't believe in Christ are living such a life spiritually. They are slaves to their own evil natures and passions, unable to break free from their addiction to sin. They are harassed and helpless - living under the looming wrath of God and the shadow of eternal death

All people are born slaves to sin - you and I included. Spiritual slaves are incapable of freeing themselves. They need a Savior. Jesus, the God we believe in, is the very Savior all people need. Let us rejoice in his work of saving us under the theme: The LORD is our Liberating Light! 1) *Who rescued us from the shadow of death.* 2) *Who freed us from of our slavery to sin.*

### **Part One: Who rescued us from the shadow of death.**

In Isaiah's time, the regions of Naphtali and Zebulun (which is the area between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean) were about to be conquered and enslaved. Why? Because the people of these regions had forsaken the LORD in order to worship other gods in the vilest of ways. According to the Bible: <sup>16</sup> *They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal.* <sup>17</sup> *They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger.* (2 Kings 17:16,17, NIV84)

And so what did the LORD do? He allowed the brutal king of Assyria to conquer the region and resettle most of the people into other areas, so that they would never be heard from again. But this would not be the only time the people of that region would suffer. Throughout history - all the way up until the time of Christ - the area around Galilee would become the door mat for foreign invaders. The people of that region

would be conquered and reconquered as army after army marched through and waged war against other nations.

Oh, how often the people of that region would long for peace! And a future, spiritual peace is exactly what the LORD mercifully promised them – as our sermon text states: *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan--*

How would that poor and distressed region be honored? Jesus, the Messiah, would live and preach in that area - as we read in our Gospel lesson for this morning. Because of Jesus: *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.*

Now understand this verse correctly: the people walking in darkness and living in the land of the shadow of death are not merely the inhabitants of Galilee. No, they are what the inhabitants of Galilee represent: all people on this earth. They are you and me.

Imagine being put in a dungeon that has absolutely no light in it. You don't know where you are. You don't know where you are going. You don't know the dangers surrounding you. You don't know how to get out. All people are born into this kind of spiritual dungeon. Sin has blinded us to the truth. People in this world are searching to discover who they are, their purpose, and their God - but they can never find these things without divine Light.

We too were once a part of the darkness. Before the LORD shined the Light of his Gospel into our hearts, we lived in ignorance. We were blindly searching, but not finding. We lived under the shadow of God's displeasure and wrath. We lived under the shadow of death.

But the LORD has shined on us a great Light. What is that Light? It is Jesus and his Gospel message of forgiveness, as He himself once said: *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* (John 8:12, NIV84) Through the preaching of God's Holy Law, Jesus has revealed our situation to us: that we have sinned against God in thought, word and deed. Our natures have been totally corrupted with sin and, because of this fact, God's judgment of eternal death, eternal separation from Him and His goodness, loomed over us.

Having illumined us to this truth the LORD has called us to repent and believe in Him for the forgiveness of sins. His Gospel message is this: "I am the only begotten Son of God. My Father sent me because He loves you. He sent me to live the perfect life you could not even begin to live in order to win the righteousness you need to stand before God. All your sins were placed on me and I died for them. God punished me, and because He did this, He will not punish you - as long as you cling to me in faith. I love you. My father loves you. Believe in me and you will have eternal life. Nothing will be able to separate you from the love God has for you through me."

What wonderful, liberating news: Jesus has saved us from the shadow of death. We don't have to be afraid any longer. The LORD had mercy on us, and so we cry out to Him: *You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.*

The Lord has enlarged His kingdom. How? By having the good news of the Gospel preached to us and many others. Whoever receives this Gospel in faith, becomes a liberated, citizen of heaven. We are no longer enslaved to the devil, and this is why we rejoice. Our joy is as great as the farmer's is after reaping a wonderful, sorely needed harvest. Our happiness is like that of a soldier after winning a hard fought war.

Peace, safety, happiness, hope and a future - these precious gifts of the LORD are given to us in the Gospel. There is no more fear of eternal death. Not only this, but we are now free to serve God, as our text continues:

Part Two: Who freed us from our slavery to sin.

*For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.*

Isaiah illustrates our liberation from sin by reminding us of how the LORD liberated Israel from the armies of Midian. The event is recorded for us in the book of Judges, where we read that: *the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. . . . Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help* (Judges 6:1,6, NIV84). And the Lord heard the prayer of His people. Under the command of Gideon the Lord conquered the huge army of Midian, with only 300 men – thereby showing his mercy to forgive and power to set free.

Just as the LORD ended all the oppression and slavery Israel experienced in the days of Midian, so also the LORD has broken the chains that enslaved us to sin. St. Paul once wrote: *thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin . . . You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.* (Rom 6:17-18 NIV84)

How does Jesus free us from our slavery to sin and make us “slaves” of righteousness? He did it, first of all, by dying for all our sins and thereby purchasing us back for God. This is how God shattered the yoke and rod of sin that enslaved us. On top of this He has called us to faith and created a new spirit inside each and every Christian. This new spirit does not want to sin. It is “a slave to righteousness,” that is, it only wants to serve God. And why? Because the spirit Jesus created in us is the spirit of being God’s dearly loved children who want nothing more than to please their heavenly Father, as the Scriptures say: *You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."*<sup>16</sup> *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.* (Rom 8:15-16 NIV84)

Sadly, we still have a sinful nature inside of us, and will continue to have this sinful nature until the day we die. This sinful nature strives against the new man God placed in our hearts. This sinful nature always tempts us to sin, and many times we fall. But no matter how much this “old Adam” rages inside of us, we are not enslaved to it. We belong to God! When we sin, God invites us to immediately repent and be forgiven. He invites us to remember our Baptisms, the new man it He has created in our hearts, and the promise that we are not alone: that the Holy Spirit will help us live our lives on this earth as God’s holy and dearly loved children.

The LORD has broken the spiritual yoke, bar, and rod that oppressed us. **Jesus is our Liberating Light, who has rescued us from the shadow of death and freed us from our slavery to sin.** Live, then as freed men and women God declared you to be. Serve God by keeping His commandments, thereby thanking Him for freedom he gave you. Live as children of God, for this is exactly what you are in Christ. Amen.