

Sermon for January 22, 2017 – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 4:12-23 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: **The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light!**

- 1) *He calls us to repent.*
- 2) *He invites us to share his light with others.*

¹²When Jesus heard that John was put in prison, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴He did this to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁵Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, ¹⁶the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and on those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death a light has dawned. ¹⁷From that time, Jesus began to preach: “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.” ¹⁸As Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the sea, since they were fishermen. ¹⁹He said to them, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰They immediately left their nets and followed him. ²¹Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. Jesus called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. ²³Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people.

When our text mentions people living in “darkness” and in “the shadow of death” what kind of place do you imagine? War-torn Mosul or Aleppo, with all their bombed-out buildings and snipers picking people off? The citizens of those cities certainly live under the shadow of death.

But what about America? Do we live in a place of darkness and the shadow of death? Not in a literal sense like the cities I mentioned before, but in a very real spiritual sense. How so? Because, like the people of Zebulun and Naphtali in our sermon text, many citizens in our country are ignorant of the salvation God offers us in Christ. Yes, they might claim to know the Gospel – much like the Jews did in Jesus’ day – but they really don’t know and are, therefore, living in the shadow of God’s looming judgement.

But, just as God sent the Savior to preach to the Galileans, so he has sent him to us. Jesus is God’s wonderful light. His law exposes the sin and darkness of the human heart. His Gospel reveals the LORD’s forgiving love that cleanses us from all sin and saves us from God’s wrath. Jesus has accomplished all this in our hearts through the preaching of His Word. Is it any wonder, then, that he wants us to share His Word with our fellow countrymen? Let us consider these things under the theme: **The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light!** *1) He calls us to repent. 2) He invites us to share his light with others.*

Part One: He calls us to repent.

Our sermon text takes place approximately a year after Jesus' baptism. Jesus had already gathered disciples and spent time preaching in Jerusalem and Judea. Herod put John into prison at this time. Now, I don't know about you, but if I heard reports about a ruler putting people into prison for preaching the Gospel, I would be a little hesitant to go there. But not Jesus. We read:

¹²*When Jesus heard that John was put in prison, he withdrew into Galilee.* ¹³*He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.*

In other words, Jesus went into the very region Herod ruled. Why? Our sermon text tells us:

¹⁴*He did this to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:* ¹⁵*Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles,* ¹⁶*the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and on those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death a light has dawned.*

Based on the description of our text, it seems like the people in Zebulun and Naphtali, which surrounded the sea of Galilee, certainly needed a Savior. What kind of people were they? Well, in a way, they were like us Americans.

You see, the region of Galilee was known to be a melting pot of different cultures – much like America is today. They had a “tradition” of following the LORD (much like America) but their “traditions” were, sadly, just that: “traditions”. They didn't understand the Old Testament, and how it pointed to the Savior. Their beliefs were a confused hodgepodge of Jewish work righteousness and pagan thought – all done under the name of the LORD.

Is it any different in America? I watched the inauguration on Friday. Do you know what I heard from the religious leaders selected to read Scripture and offer prayers? A hodgepodge of Christianity, Judaism and humanism – presented under the facade of God's name.

Yes, in many ways America is like the region of Galilee. The popular religion of our land is a confused mixture of all sorts of thoughts and ideas. People think that it doesn't matter which god you believe in because, as long as you work hard and are nice to other people, everything will be ok.

But these popular beliefs are wrong. Does it matter which God you pray to? Listen to what the Bible says: *there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*ⁱ Jesus himself once said: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*ⁱⁱ And what about the notion that if you live a good life everything will be ok? Again, listen to what the Bible says: *whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*ⁱⁱⁱ Yes, the Bible even goes so far as to say that, before the LORD, *all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.*^{iv}

The truth is that all humanity is living in spiritual darkness and the shadow of death. We are all sinful and in desperate need of a Savior. We all need God's light to show us the way we can be at peace with Him.

And, just as the LORD mercifully revealed his soul-saving light to the people living in Zebulun and Naphtali, so he has revealed him to us. Jesus is God's light, who reveals to us the way of salvation. And how does he do that? The same way he did in the region around Galilee: through the preaching of his Word, as we read in our text: ¹⁷*From that time, Jesus began to preach: "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near."*

"Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near" – do you understand what this simple sentence means? It's as if Christ is telling you: "Look at God's righteous law. Understand that you are filthy and can in no way earn God's favor. Why not? Because you have not loved God as you ought – seeking him with your whole heart, soul, strength and mind. You have not loved your neighbor as yourself. You have often lied, gossiped, coveted what isn't yours, ignored the needs of others and pursued self-indulgence over being right with God. For these reasons, you have no claim to heaven. Eternal death in hell is your just reward."

But, hear this: your God loves you in spite of your sins. He sent me – his one and only Son – to save you. I have come to live the life of perfect obedience to God's law that you have failed to live. I have come to take all your sins upon myself and be sacrificed for them. I have come to do these things for you. Repent: turn away from your sins and trust in me. Let me forgive you and give you my righteousness as a gift. Let me rule in your heart so that you may be at peace with God and inherit eternal life."

Brothers and sisters in Christ: We, the people dwelling in darkness, have seen a great light! Through the preaching of his Law the LORD has led us to recognize our utter sinfulness and need for His forgiveness. Through the preaching of the Gospel, God revealed his love and salvation to us in the person of Christ. The Holy Spirit has shined his light in our hearts, awakening our spiritually dead souls to repentance and faith.

And, by God's grace, the LORD continues to shine the light of his salvation into our heart through the continued preaching of His Word and administration of his sacraments. The means of grace move us to live in a continuous state of repentance – that is, a continual turning away from sin and turning to him in faith. This is why it is of the utmost importance to regularly gather for worship, Bible class and have personal devotions at home. Why? So that we might remain in his soul-saving light, and not wander back under the shadow of death that looms over all who refuse to believe in Christ.

Sadly, far too many people live in this spiritual darkness – fellow countrymen and neighbors, people we know and love. Is there anything we can do to save them? Yes, there is! As we will see next, Jesus calls us to follow him, so that we might learn to share his soul saving light with others.

Part Two: *He invites us to share his light with others.*

¹⁸*As Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the sea, since they were fishermen. ¹⁹He said to them, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰They immediately left their nets*

and followed him. ²¹Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. Jesus called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Now, an astute listener of last week's Gospel lesson might say: "Didn't we learn that Andrew, Peter, James and John, came to know Jesus by the Jordan River after John the Baptist pointed Jesus out to them?" Yes, we did. But our sermon text from Matthew is not recording the first time they followed Jesus as his disciples.

Do you remember how I said that the events of our text took place about a year after Jesus' ministry began? Peter, Andrew, James and John were already Jesus' disciples. But being a student doesn't pay the bills, so, at this particular time, we find them working their day jobs as fishermen so they could support their families.

But Jesus had other plans for them. He wanted them to progress from being mere students of the Word to being teachers and preachers of it. Jesus' call was not a call to faith, but a call to service – to be fishers of men! And how would they do that? Jesus would show them – teaching them the art of casting the net of the Gospel and being his lights on this earth.

Notice that these disciples don't tell Jesus to wait until they finish their work, or ask him to come back once they got their finances all set for their families. No, these disciples immediately dropped everything to follow him. Why? Because they trusted that Jesus was the Christ and understood the importance of His mission. Nothing is more urgent than preaching the Gospel. Besides all this, they also trusted that Jesus would provide for both them and their families.

Oh that we all would be like the disciples and immediately heed Jesus' call to learn from him! You see, Jesus didn't call just those four disciples to be fishers of men, he wants all Christians to be his lights on this earth – as he himself said in his famous sermon on the mount: ¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. . . let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*^v

Yes, just as Jesus called those four disciples, so he is calling you to confess his Gospel on this earth. "But," you might protest, "I am not equal to this task. How would I answer the questions people ask me about God when I am so unstudied? What do I say and how do I say it?"

Brothers and sisters in Christ: the disciples Jesus' called by the sea of Galilee could have said the exact same things. But they didn't. Why? Because Jesus was calling them to learn from him. He would be with them – teaching them everything they needed to know. And the same is true for us. Jesus has called us to learn from him. Whenever we gather together for worship and Bible class, Jesus is with us – teaching us through his Word everything we need to know to be his ambassadors in the world.

There is no reason to be afraid. Follow Jesus and learn from Him by making diligent use of his Word and Sacraments. He is your light, who has saved you from the shadow of sin and death under which you once lived. He rescued you by calling you to repentance and faith through the light of His Gospel. And he wishes to shine this same soul-saving light on all your family, friends

and neighbors. This is why he calls you to follow Him – not only to save you, but to save others through you; that is, through your confession of His Word.

We live in a land of spiritual darkness over which the shadow of death looms. But, praise God, Christ, our light has dawned upon us. He calls us to repent. He invites us to share his light with others. Let us do that, so that many more might have the same hope we have in Christ. Amen.

ⁱ 1 Timothy 2:5 NIV84

ⁱⁱ John 14:6 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ James 2:10 NIV84

^{iv} Isaiah 64:6 NIV84

^v Matthew 5:14,16 NIV84