

January 23, 2005

Epiphany 3

"A Great Light Shines in the Land of Darkness"

ISAIAH 9:1-4

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death {² Or land of darkness} a light has dawned. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

When Jesus began his ministry he started in the lowly land of Galilee. He did not start in the perform miracles and preaching in capital city of Jerusalem. His first disciples were fishermen who made their living from the Sea of Galilee. His first miracle of changing water into wine happened in Cana of Galilee. Capernaum in Galilee became the base of his operation.

Humanly speaking, the land of the Galilee should have been the last place in Palestine for Jesus to begin his ministry. It was known even in Old Testament times as a land of darkness. At the time of Jesus it was even worse. You will recall that when Peter and the disciples spoke to a large crowd of people at Pentecost their authority was questioned because they were Galileans. Most of the evil spirits Jesus threw out of people were in the land of the Galilee, the land of darkness.

Why would our heavenly Father pick Galilee as the place for Jesus to begin his ministry? If Donald Trump wants to build a new Trump tower, does he pick a place a city like Bakersfield or Bismarck, North Dakota? No, Trump will pick a place that spells success, Chicago, LA, Las Vegas or New York. The Lord our God does not operate like the successful owner of a large company who determines where to start the next business on the basis statistical analysis. Our God finds the worst places, places like Galilee, as the starting point for the light of the gospel to shine brightly. In Isaiah 55 the Lord tells us, "As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

This morning we want to see how **"A Great Light Shines in the Land of Darkness."** In the darkest moments of your life, when God seems so far away from you, he can enter your darkness and shine with the light of the glory that is ours in Christ Jesus our Savior.

1) Look at how dark things can be

Could there be a darker place than Galilee? Not according to the prophet Isaiah. 700 years before Jesus began preaching and teaching, the prophet spoke about this land of darkness. "In the past he humbled he land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali." The Lord our God humbled these two northern tribes situated between the Sea of Galilee and the

Jordan River. These people fell under God's punishment because they opened themselves up to worshipping the fertility cult gods of the Canaanite people. On the tops of hills and in groves they worshipped Baal and tried to combine it with a false worship of the true God. This conflicted with the worship that God had established at the temple in Jerusalem.

In his love the Lord our God sent prophets to call these people from the darkness and bring them into the light. Remember how Elijah stood up against the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and called for a contest between the true God and Baal? Altars were constructed and sacrifices places on the altar, and they called down fire from heaven to burn the sacrifices. The prophets of Baal who were supported by the Jewish people living in these northern tribes called from morning till night and nothing happened. Elijah prayed to the true God and fire fell from heaven consuming the sacrifice, reducing the altar of stones to dust and licking up the water in the trench. For a brief moment the people wanted to be back in the light, but then they retreated into even greater darkness as the worship of this fertility cult became worse and worse. Parents sacrificed their own kids to these heathen gods, so great was the darkness in the land.

Finally the Lord had enough. He allowed the Assyrians to conquer the northern tribes, and take the best people away into captivity. The Assyrians dumped their worst people into the northern tribes, similar to what Castro did to us in the 1970's when he allowed 100,000 prisoners to come to our shores in a variety of boats. It says in 2 Kings 17, "The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cutha, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim, and settled them in the towns of the Samaria to replace the Israelites. The land became an even greater land of darkness with heathen people from various lands intermingled with God's people.

Just how dark were things when Jesus began his ministry in this land of darkness? We are told in Mark 5 that Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gerasenes. A man with an evil spirit confronted Jesus. The evil spirit made him so strong he could rip off the chains that had been placed on his feet. He lived in the caves and cut his body with stones. When Jesus cast out the evil spirits in this man, they violently entered a herd of pigs. 2000 pigs perished by running over the cliff. Why was there a herd of pigs in a land that was the Holy Land, where God's people were not to eat pork? This land had become a land of darkness, a land that rejected the Lord. It was a place where people made up their own religious beliefs and evil spirits abounded.

What the prophet Isaiah said about Galilee, we can see in our own land and its people. We are living in a land where people are walking in darkness and living in the land of the shadow of death. There is general agreement among those who analyze our society that this current generation is very religious but they want God on their own terms. As one woman named Sheila said in an interview, "I believe in God, but I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It is "Sheilaism." Just my own little voice."

Is this age any different than any other age in history? Listen to what the ancient church father Crysostom had to say of the people of his time. "Like men with sore eyes, they find the light painful, while the darkness which permits them to see nothing is restful and agreeable." The gospel of John singles out people of every generation as living in darkness. "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."

You and I were born into the darkness and our natural human instinct, corrupted by sin, prefers the darkness to the light. Ephesians says, "You were once darkness." It is a darkness that leads me to think that I can have God on my own terms and not be held accountable for every sin that I have committed. It is a darkness that can lead me to believe that my own human effort makes me acceptable to God. In this darkness I may think it is right to offer one of my children as a sacrifice to the gods, or take a life within the womb and offer as an excuse the word, "Choice." Born into darkness I could be joining millions of pilgrims on a pilgrimage to Mecca, or I could be strapping bombs to myself to die believing I will have the highest levels of Allah's heaven.

What scares me most about this darkness, is that I find it wants to pull me into itself even after I become a Christian. Always there is the evil nature that lurks within that wants to take you and me down into the dark cave, where we no longer see the light of God's love. Sin and unbelief can expand and grow and create a darkness that causes us to wake up in the morning and not even see or fully grasp the light of God's love. The darkness becomes so great it becomes difficult to pray and even find comfort in the Word of the Lord as we should.

Why did Jesus choose to start his ministry in the land of darkness? Why did he choose to come into your life and mine and lead us to the light of his love? That is the great mystery of God's love for us. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me..." As Paul wrote, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord."

2) Look at how bright the light can shine

Isaiah so beautifully describes the light that came into Galilee and the light that has come into your life and mine. "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." Notice it does not say that they saw a light. It says they saw a great light. Our gospel lesson told us, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness of the people."

The people living in darkness saw Jesus as their light. They believed in him. Their lives were filled with joy. Isaiah describes this joy. "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 prophet compares this joy of deliverance that came through Jesus to the deliverance God's people enjoyed under Gideon. "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."

How bright is the light that shone in the land of darkness? How bright is the light that shines in your life this morning? Jesus has broken or shattered the yoke that burdens you, and the bar across your shoulders. Imagine this pail filled with water, and another of equal weight, with a bar across your shoulders. There are days when the burdens you carry seem like a heavy weight, a load full of stones, almost breaking you down and sending you to your knees. Have you ever carried a heavy load of sin, guilt and shame? Have you ever carried a heavy burden of worry for someone you love, messed up by drugs and alcohol, overcome with illness, not close to the Lord and his love? Have you ever carried a burden

of not being all that you can be for the Lord? My dear Christians, rejoice. Rejoice with the people of Galilee, living in the land of darkness. Your light has come. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest. My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Remember when you toured a cave and the docent turn off all the lights. Remember that panic moment when you could see nothing. Then the lights came back on again. That's what our life once was, but now a great light has come. In this cave that we live, this cave we call our life on this earth, the light has come and with our eyes of faith we can see all the blessings Christ has given us. They are real to us, and they allow us rejoice as the people once did living in Galilee in the land of darkness. Amen.