

January 27, 2008
Epiphany 3

"A Great Light Comes to the Land of Darkness"

MATTHEW 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali-- ¹⁴ to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁵ "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- ¹⁶ the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." ¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." ¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. ²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

It is significant that Jesus public ministry did not begin in Jerusalem or even his hometown of Nazareth. It began in a land of darkness, the land of Galilee, a land of heathenism and unbelief. Modern marketing experts might dare to tell us that Jesus should have gone to a place where people would be more receptive to the Word of God. But then God's ways are not our ways. In Isaiah 55 the Lord tells us, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." It was the prophet Isaiah predicted that this unlikely land of darkness would have the privilege of seeing a great light.

A couple of years ago some people in Orcutt were trying to mount a campaign to get Trader Joe's to open a store in the Oak Knolls shopping center. Trader Joe's bypassed Orcutt because they did not think there were enough people interested in the type of food Trader Joe's offers. Imagine if they decided instead to open a store in some little town like Los Alamos, or Guadalupe, or Garey or Sisquoc. What strange places to begin a new store!

So it was with Jesus. He began telling people the good news of the kingdom of God in a place of darkness, the land of Galilee, humanly speaking the worst possible place to begin mission work. He even chose fishermen from Galilee as his disciples who would bring the light of his glory and love to the world. It never ceases to amaze us how Jesus reaches into the darkness and brings people to the light of his love. It amazes us how he personally reached into your life and mine and brought us out of the darkness into the light. Today we want to see more clearly **"A Bright Light Shining in a Dark Place."**

The darkness is great

Jesus withdrew into this land of darkness after John the Baptist was put into prison. "When Jesus heard that John had been put into prison, he returned to Galilee." Jesus often withdrew into solitary places to be alone with his Father during stressful times of his ministry, just as we seek out a solitary place where we can be alone with Jesus during stressful times in our lives. The land of Galilee is not a quiet place. It was a land of darkness, the domain of King Herod who eventually beheaded John the Baptist, a land of demon possession, a land described by the prophet Isaiah as Galilee of the Gentiles, people living in darkness, people living in the shadow of death.

How did Galilee become such a dark place? From history we know that this area of the Northern tribes changed dramatically when it was conquered by the Assyrians around 700 years before Jesus was born. These evil people took the best people from the land and hauled them away to be used like slaves. They brought people from their own land. They were steeped in darkness and unbelief and worship of strange gods. Heathen Gentiles and hard hearted Jews blended together to create a land of darkness, an abode of evil spirits and people possessed by demons.

When we hear Isaiah describe how this area was inhabited by people living in darkness and people living in the shadow of death we are reminded of other times and places in our world where the darkness is almost overwhelming. See the Indian mother walk into the waters of the Ganges River and lower her infant daughter and watch her body carried downstream, a sacrifice to guarantee that she will have more children in the future. See the man pushing a cart with a heater on it to a school in Baghdad. The heater is filled with bombs. Teachers, children and parents die horrific deaths. See the darkness all around us as material possessions and the pursuit of pleasure become more important than the Lord who gives us these blessings. Romans 1 says, "But their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

But then we look inside of our own hearts and realize the darkness that once existed before Jesus came to us. Listen to what Ephesians 2 says about people who were spiritual dead and living in this land of darkness. "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature, and following its desires and thoughts." We were born into this darkness, and then the light came into our lives. What frightens us about this darkness is how it can creep up on us and pull us in without even realizing what is happening. How scary that we can start feeling so comfortable in the darkness that sin no longer shocks us as it once did. And what about people we have known and even love who once walked in the light of the Lord and now we see them being drawn into the darkness and living every day in that darkness. Did you hear about the man in France who lost 7 billion dollars of his company's money by making bad investments to cover up his mistakes? The darkness creeps up on us when we try to ignore or even cover the evil that lurks in our hearts instead of confessing it before God. Ephesians 5 says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light...Have nothing to do with the deeds of darkness." ,

The darkness is so great, but into this land of darkness we see a great light shining. "From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." That land of darkness, the land of the Gentiles, the land of the people living around the Sea of Galilee had Jesus living in their villages, walking along its shores, teaching people, performing miracles and talking to them about the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God.

The greatest need people have in this life is to know that they are loved. Even your dog or cat needs to know it is loved. It has been said that you can live thirty days without food, three days without water, three minutes without air, but only three seconds without hope. To know that you are eternally loved by God and nothing can separate you from his love is the greatest blessing that can ever come into your life. That is what the kingdom of heaven is all about. That is what Jesus talked about when he preached the good news of the kingdom of heaven. He told stories about a son that was lost and came home to the open arms of a loving Father to illustrate this love. He told the people about a king, about himself, their Lord and God who had come to rescue them and open up treasures to them. The greatest treasure is the love he earned for all of us by dying on the cross to make a ransom payment for sin and deliver you from the darkness that controls our lives. Romans 8 says, "Nothing in all creation will ever separate us from the love of God that exists in Jesus Christ our Lord." This is the great light that has come into your life. As we heard a few weeks ago from Isaiah 60, "Arise and shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

The Lord does not just want this light shining in dark places like Galilee or your life and my life. He wants people all over the world to enjoy this blessing and come out of the darkness. That is why he calls on people to let their light shine to others.

The light shines brightly

Jesus called his disciples so they would bring this light to others still in the darkness. Just as Jesus chose an unlikely place of darkness to shine forth with his glory, he chose unlikely people, fishermen from Galilee to take this light into the world. It has been said that two greatest needs we have in life are to be loved and to be useful. Could you have any more important useful purpose in life than taking what has been given to you and bringing it to other people?

Jesus walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He reached into this land of darkness and called fishermen to come and follow him. "He saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a nets into the lake for they were fishermen. 'Come follow me,' Jesus said. At once they left their nets and followed him." Then Jesus saw two other brothers, James and John and he called them to follow him as they were mending nets with their father. "Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."

This was not the first time these two sets of brothers heard Jesus speak to them. As we heard last week, it was John the Baptist who pointed Andrew to Jesus and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Andrew spent time with Jesus, and Andrew told his brother Peter we have found the Messiah. James and John were also among those who listened to Jesus and spent time with them. Then the call came that changed their lives. "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Instead of throwing out nets to capture fish they would throw out the word of God and see it bring in people. Instead of mending nets they would be mending the lives of broken people with the never failing promises of God's Word.

It says of Peter and Andrew that they were casting nets into the Sea of Galilee. Fishermen

caught fish by dragging a net through the water, and by casting a net out into the water, the way a person might throw out a blanket and make it spread out as much as possible. On our family farm, I watched in amazement as a Hungarian refugee was able to cast a net into the river and catch fish. Remember that time when the disciples cast out their nets and it became so full of fish the net began to break. Remember that one sermon Peter the old fisherman preached on Pentecost and 3000 people were brought to faith. But now the rest of the story. Those three thousand talked to other people about Jesus and his death and his resurrection and the need to believe before the end comes. That's where the more spectacular growth of the church comes in.

I am holding in my hand a variety of light bulbs and flashlight and even a candle and lantern. There are many ways to generate light. In the Christian Church the Lord uses a variety of different people to cause his light to shine into the darkness. He picked strange people to be his first disciples, fishermen from Galilee, who would stand up to kings and authorities and shake the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. He still picks strange people to do this work today. Do you want evidence? Then look into a mirror. Look into the mirror and marvel at how the Lord called you out of the darkness and how he uses you to bring others out of the darkness. Look into the mirror and read 1 Peter 2 and apply it to yourself: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." The light of the world has come into your world of darkness. Now you are privileged to be the light that leads others out of the darkness. Amen.