

January 23, 2011
Epiphany 3

"Jesus Shines in the Land of Great Darkness"

ISAIAH 9:1-4

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-- ²The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. ³You 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. ⁴For 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.

Have you seen the new In/Out Burger place in Arroyo Grande? It is highly visible as you drive up the 101 Freeway. I've heard there are long lines and full crowds. But that should not surprise us. The In/Out Burger people have a way of picking locations for their restaurants that almost guarantee their success. Real Estate people tell us the three key words for good real estate are, "Location, Location, Location."

If marketing experts were in charge of determining where Jesus should start his ministry, they would have never chosen the land of Galilee. The land of Galilee was a land of great darkness and unbelief. Isaiah predicted that a great light would someday shine in this land that had once been humbled by the Lord, the land of Galilee, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. That great light was Jesus. God chose a land of darkness as the place for Jesus to begin teaching and performing miracles. God's ways are not our ways. He doesn't follow the path of human reason and modern marketing techniques. In Isaiah 55 the Lord tells us, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."

This morning we want to think about God's amazing grace that causes the light of his love to shine in dark places, very dark places. Do you want evidence that the light of Jesus' love shines in dark places? Then look into your own life and see how Jesus the light of the world has shone brightly into your dark life to lead you to believe what you believe this morning.

See the depths of the darkness

Could there be a land of greater darkness than the land of Galilee? Listen again to how Isaiah describes this land. "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. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light." The land of Galilee where Jesus began his ministry is described as the land of the Gentiles, the land of the heathen. It is described as a land of darkness. It was a land that had been humbled by the Lord because of the darkness that pervaded its society. You see, when people want to plunge themselves into darkness, eventually the Lord gives them over to the darkness. All kinds of evils break forth. Romans 1 says, "Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened... Therefore God gave them over to sinful desires of their hearts."

How did it become so dark and so evil in the land of Galilee? Let's go back in history to the time after King Solomon. Remember how the southern tribes wanted to follow a king named Rehoboam and the northern tribes wanted to follow a king named Jeroboam. Jeroboam wanted to protect his turf and preserve his power just as politicians do today, so he set up an alternate site of worship in the north. He told the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods O Israel who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Instead of worshipping in the temple in Jerusalem where animal sacrifices pointed to Jesus the Lamb of God, they worshipped their own way under images of golden calves. It did not take long for these people to mix the sensuous Baal worship with this new way of worship that they had developed for themselves.

How dark did it get? Think of the great showdown on Mount Carmel between the prophets of Baal who were this northern area of Galilee and Elijah. Remember how many prophets Baal had for the showdown? Yes, there were 450 and another 400 prophets of Asherah. Can you hear them intoning from morning to night? "O Baal hear us. Send down fire and burn the sacrifice." How many prophets were there for the Lord? Just one. Elijah prayed to the Lord to send down fire and ignite the sacrifice to prove he was the true God. "Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God." You know the rest of the story. Fire came down from heaven, burnt the wood, the sacrifice and the stones, and even licked up the water in the trench that had been poured on the sacrifice. The people shouted, "The Lord he is God." For a moment the light did shine, but then how quickly they went back into deeper darkness and unbelief.

It says the Lord humbled this land. Eventually the Lord allowed the Assyrians to come and capture the people and enslave them. The king of Assyria took the best people of the land as slaves, and repopulated the land with people he did not want. It says in 2 Kings, "The king of Assyria invaded the entire land. He captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria." Then it says, "The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cutha, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim, and settle them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites." Darkness was added to darkness and the land became even more heathen and resistant to God's love.

How bad were things in this land of darkness at the time of Jesus? When you read the beginning of Jesus ministry in Galilee there seems to be so many confrontations with people possessed by evil spirits. One man was so possessed by evil spirits that they could not even tie him with chains. He would break the chains with by the power of the evil spirits that possessed him. When Jesus threw out the evil spirits that inhabited that poor man's body, they went into a herd of pigs and the herd of pigs plunged headlong over a cliff into the Sea of Galilee. Do you recall how many pigs died that day? Over 2000! Who was eating the pork? It was the large number of heathen living in this land of darkness. They were people who no longer wanted God's Old Testament laws in their lives.

When you hear about the darkness that came into this land of Galilee we are reminded of the darkness that comes back into nations when people reject God's Word and want nothing to do with gospel message. Large churches in England and Europe that were once filled with people worshipping the Lord are now echoing empty with only a handful of people uniting their voices in song of praises to the Lord. I have heard it said that in London there are more Muslims in mosques each week than Christians in churches. Before we point too many fingers at the darkness in other lands what about the darkness that comes

into our own land? Have you seen the crosses in front of some of the churches in our community that are a reminder of all the little babies that have been killed in the wombs of their mothers? Football championship games are more important than spending time with the Lord in worship.

We know the darkness first hand. We were born in it. We see it trying to creep back into our lives. Ephesians 5 says, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." Listen to how Isaiah describes this darkness that was once part of our lives as well: "So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong we are like dead." If it were not for a bright light shining in our lives we would be still be worshipping such gods as Tiu, and Woden and Thor and Freya, gods that led to the names Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. If it were not for the light of God's Word shining in our land, we would be living in a darkened land where parents would be agonizing over how do find cures for their children who possessed by an evil spirit.

We know darkness first hand. We have seen it try to creep back into our lives in a variety of different ways. We need the word of Scripture that encourage us to stay in the light. Ephesians reminds us, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light."

The light of Jesus' loves shines brightly

Ah, but how beautiful is the light that has now come into your life and mine. Listen again to the vivid description in Isaiah. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned." Notice it says that the people walking in darkness have seen a great light. The people of Galilee were privilege to see Jesus face to face. They saw his mighty miracles. They heard his words. In our Gospel reading it says of Jesus, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent for the kingdom of God is near.'" Jesus talked to these people about his kingdom. He told them about his love for them, his willingness to die for them, forgive them of their sins, and bring them into a kingdom of love unlike anything they had ever experienced before in their lives. Where ever Jesus goes even today, people are able to confess simply and profoundly, "Jesus loves me this I know. For the Bible tells me so."

And what happens where Jesus shines brightly into the lives of people? Oh, how their lives change! Isaiah says, "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." He compares it to breaking the yoke or heavy burden that is across our backs. See the people rejoice in the harvest. How happy they are to bring in the food and store it up for the winter months. He compares it to breaking the yoke or heavy burden that is across our backs. In John 16 Jesus says these amazing words about the Holy Spirit who causes the light of Jesus' love to shine more brightly in our lives. "That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you." Everything that belongs to Jesus, everything he did while he was on this earth, his perfect life, his perfect death, the Holy Spirit brings to us and says, all this that Jesus offers you is yours. It belongs to you. This fills you with joy and lifts the burden off your shoulders. This great light comes into the most unlikely place. It comes into your life and mine. I was blind but now I see.

Oh what will we do to keep the darkness from coming back into our lives this week? We pray with Paul in Ephesians 3, "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge- that you may be able to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." God picks the most unlikely places to bring light into darkness. You and I are living proof of how true this is. Amen.