

January 26, 2014

Epiphany 3

"Jesus Shines in the 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.

Five years ago young girls could not get enough of fourteen year old singing star Justin Bieber whom they affectionately called "The Biebs." About two weeks ago, sheriffs entered his posh mansion and found drugs and drug paraphernalia in almost every room of the house. This past week the Biebs was arrested in Florida for driving under the influence of prescription drugs which he claimed were given to him by his mother. Friends are pleading with Bieber to seek help and get into a drug rehabilitation program. How sad that another celebrity who was once a wholesome role model has now plunged himself into darkness.

Isaiah the prophet tells us this morning how God's Old Testament people also plunged themselves into darkness. They gave up the worship of the true God for the worship of idols and also engaged in witchcraft. Listen to what Isaiah says a few verses before the words we just read to you. "When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their own God? Why consult the dead in behalf of the living?" And then the Lord says through Isaiah, "Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, they will curse their king and their God."

Is there hope for people who plunge themselves into the darkness? Yes, there is. Jesus began his ministry in the land of Galilee, a land of great darkness. Isaiah even predicted that this land of great darkness would see a great light. He predicted the coming of a child who would be called, Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Jesus did not begin preaching and teaching in areas with great light such as Jerusalem or Bethlehem. He went into a land of deepest darkness. That should not surprise us. Jesus said "I have come to seek and save that which was lost." Jesus is the light of the world. He wants to come into the lives of people living in darkness, even those who plunge themselves into deep darkness. He wants to come to us when we find ourselves slipping back into patches of darkness.

The darkness is great

The darkness that came into the land of Galilee was truly a great darkness. "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the

land of Zepulun and the land of Naphtal, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles by way of the sea along Jordan” This land of Naphtali and Zepulun was the region around the sea of Galilee. We think of the cities along the Sea of Galilee as an idyllic place where Jesus could begin his ministry. Isaiah says it was a place where people walked in darkness and lived in the land of the shadow of death.

How did it become so dark? You need to know the history of this region. When Solomon died, the northern tribes separated from the tribes in the south under the leadership of Jeroboam. Jeroboam did not want the people traveling to Jerusalem to worship. So he set up alternate places of worship in the north and told the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are you gods O Israel who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” This false worship in the north drifted farther and farther away from the true God. It incorporated elements of Baal worship in its ceremonies. The darkness reached its deepest depths at the time of Elijah the prophet. There were over 450 prophets of the false god Baal and 400 prophets of the false goddess Asherah. There was only one prophet of the Lord, the faithful prophet Elijah.

The land became even more darkened and steeped in unbelief, when the king of Assyria took thousands of the best people and hauled them off for slavery. He took the worst people in his country and put them into the northern tribes, creating a mixture of heathen and Jew. That is why it was called the land of the Gentiles. 2 Kings 17 says, “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 settled them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites.”

At the time of Jesus this land of darkness seems to have more than its share of demon possessed people? That is characteristic of heathen lands where the word of God has not entered into homes and hearts of people. When Jesus cast the evil spirits out of the man from the region of the Gadarenes, they went into a herd of pigs, a herd of 2000 pigs that plunged over the cliff! Who ate all the pork, when God’s people were not to eat pork? It was the people of Galilee who were living in this land of darkness, who could care less about God’s Word and the promise of a Messiah. We tend to have an idyllic view of places like Cana, or Capernaum, the towns on the Sea of Galilee. In reality they were a land of great darkness as the prophet Isaiah tells us. The Gospel of John tells us, “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

In his book *Against the Night* Charles Colson tells how the Nuremberg trials after World War 2 were almost too much for the Jewish people who had lost their family members by the hand of the Nazis. What unnerved them the most was how nice and well mannered these people when they were called to give an account of what they had done wrong. How could people who look so polite and polished on the outside, be capable of planning such evil deeds. Even today there is a deep darkness that takes over the lives of people who prepare bombs to kill others, or engage in acts of adultery, or even bring false teaching within the church.

And where would we be this morning if this great light had not come into our lives? Ephesians 5 says of us, “You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” The darkness into which I was born was a great darkness. Isaiah the prophet speaks of this

darkness with these words, "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 the dead." I was born foolishly thinking I can manufacture enough goodness in my life to pay for the sins I have committed. I was born into the darkness that believes I can escape the judgment to come on my efforts and feeble attempts to please God. It is only by the grace of God that you and I do not live under the dark shadow of death of a false religion that calls Allah our god. Oh, how much we needed Jesus to shine into our lives and rescue us.

It is scary to think of how the darkness can creep back into your life. We become accustomed to certain pet sins that keep repeating themselves in our lives. We take vacations from reading the Word of God and prayer. Our dear brothers and sisters in Christ are no longer as important to us as they once were. The darkness of the world does not shock as it once did. When I was a little child I had a cross in my bedroom that glowed in the dark. On the back of the cross it said, "Keep it in the light and it will glow in the dark." Jesus wants to shine in the dark spots and dark patches that enter our lives.

The Light is greater

The prophet Isaiah predicted the land of Galilee would have the distinct privilege of seeing a great light. Isaiah predicted that in the future the Lord would honor Galilee of the Gentiles. He predicted the people would see a great light and the light would dawn on them. They would rejoice like people bringing home the harvest or dividing up the plunder.

Jesus chose this land of darkness as the place where people saw his first miracle of changing water into wine. It says in John 2 of Cana in Galilee, "He thus revealed his glory and his disciples put their faith in him." It was in the region of the Sea of Galilee that Jesus opened the eyes of the blind to see and opened hearts to believe in him. It says in Matthew, "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 was from the people of Galilee the land of great darkness that Jesus chose his beloved disciples. On the great day of Pentecost people looked down on the disciples who were filled with the Holy Spirit. They said of them, "Aren't these Galileans?" Jesus the great Light had come into their lives and filled with them with the boldness to witness to him.

Isaiah pictures the miracle that happened in Galilee in this way. "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 oppressors." I am holding in my hand a stick. See how the arms of slaves are tied to the stick and then forced to march for miles. See the yokes tied around their necks to keep them enslaved.

In the 1970's there was a miniseries on television called "Roots." It was the story of African American people recalling their roots as people from African who were brought over to this country to be slaves. In one episode it showed Arabs attacking African villages and then tying the people to sticks that were across the shoulders and yokes around their necks. They were marched to the sea and put into the darkened holds of ships. That is how your life once was. You were once under the slavery of sin and death and Satan. You

were once living the land of darkness. Then a great light came into your life. Jesus came to you. He called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light. Ephesians 1 says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." Forgiveness. Redemption. Freedom. Light instead of darkness.

Even those music stars who win Grammy awards and then plunge themselves into the deepest darkness, still have hope. Jesus wants to be the great light that comes into their lives. He wants to be the great light in your life. That's our greatest blessing. Jesus shines in the darkness. Amen.