

Epiphany 3
January 22, 2017

“A Land of Darkness Sees a Great Light”

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.

How did you come to settle here on the Central Coast? Was it a job that brought you here? Was it friends or family? Did you settle here because you wanted a nice place to retire? I can tell you how I came to live here. It was in 1989 that members of this congregation called me to be their pastor. I have spent almost 28 wonderful years in this congregation and this community.

We are told in the words we just read to you that Jesus settled down to begin his ministry in Galilee. Why did he choose this place? Well, here is why. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah said that he would begin his ministry in the land of Zebulun and land Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. It was a land of great darkness. Marketing experts would say that was the worst place to begin. But then we know that God’s ways are not our ways. The light of his love can shine into the darkest of human hearts and bring people to believe. Your life and mine are proofs of this fact.

The great darkness

The land of darkness that saw a great light was truly a land of great darkness. We are told that Jesus withdrew into this land of darkness after John the Baptist was thrown into prison. “When Jesus heard that John had been put into prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali.” What does Jesus do when he hears about the great darkness in King Herod that caused him to throw John into prison? He goes into even more darkness by making Galilee the headquarters for his ministry. Think of all the cases of demon possession in the land of Galilee that Jesus cured. Truly this was a land of great darkness.

While I was working on this sermon and thinking how often Jesus cast out evil spirits from people in this land of darkness, I received an email from our Northwestern Publishing House promoting a new book with the title, "2000 Demons: No Match for My Savior." In the Foreword of this book, a pastor from Southeast Asia, Pheng Moua, writes, "I grew up learning and embracing the tradition of my ancestors. The spiritual realm is always something that clouds the minds and hearts of my people. Most of us fear the unseen spirits. We imagine they eventually will swallow us up slowly, like a snake devouring its crushed prey. We know our community is surrounded by demons. We are afraid." What this man said about his life in Southeast Asia was certainly true of the people living in Galilee at the time of Jesus. It was a land of great darkness.

How did it get so dark? From history we know the northern tribes began to break away from the Lord when they separated from the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. 700 years before Jesus was born the Assyrians conquered the land. They hauled the best people away into slavery and inserted their own people into the land. The darkness that came with the worship of Baal now combined with the darkness that came with the false gods of the Assyrians. As evidence of great darkness think of what happened when Jesus throw out the evil spirits from the demon possessed man in the land of Gadarenes. The evil spirits went into a herd of 2000 pigs and drove them over a cliff and into sea. 2000 pigs is a lot of pigs, raised by people who could care less about what God said about eating unclean food such as pork. It was in this darkness that Jesus began preaching the good news of the kingdom of God.

When we 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 other parts of Europe were once filled with people worshipping the Lord. Now they echo 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 Friday than Christians in churches on Sunday. 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.

It is always so easy to point a finger at the darkness of unbelief and rebellion against God that we see in the lives of other people and other nations. But it is hard to detect the darkness when it starts creeping back into our lives. Here is what the Apostle Paul wrote to the dear Christians in Ephesus. "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light." When you start opening your life to sinful behavior, Satan encourages you to find comfort in that darkness. He encourages you to justify and make excuses for what you are doing wrong. And if you continually make excuses for yourself, the darkness becomes more and more comfortable for you. You may actually enjoy it more than the light of God's love. The prophet Isaiah said, "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 are way like men without eyes."

What does Jesus do when he sees people living in darkness or starting to slip back into the darkness? He calls them to repentance. He calls them to come into this kingdom by

proclaiming to them the good news of the kingdom of God.

The great light

The people of Galilee who were living in darkness saw a great light when Jesus went through the towns and villages proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" To repent means to come out of the kingdom of darkness and unbelief and come into the kingdom of Jesus' love for you.

There are only two kingdoms in this world. There is the kingdom of darkness and there is the kingdom of light. In the kingdom of darkness Satan rules the lives of people. He convinces them they are safe living in this world of darkness where they foolishly think everything is OK with them and their God because they are trying to live a half way decent life. In this kingdom darkness people are totally comfortable making excuses for how they are living their lives even though it is contrary to what God tells us in his Word or even what they feel in their own consciences.

Sin loves the darkness. It is like a cockroach that loves the darkness. They love to spread their dirt and filth under the cover of darkness. I know because I once lived in a small apartment in Phoenix where cockroaches came into my apartment from other apartments nearby. Come home at night, turn on the light, and watch them scatter across the room looking for a place to hide in the darkness.

Jesus calls us out of the darkness with his words, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near." To repent means to say, "I can't stay in this darkness any longer. I need help. I need Jesus to rescue me and take me into his kingdom where he will forgive me, and protect me and give me eternal life."

This amazing light of Jesus' rescuing people is reaching out to people all over the world in these last days. Here is what Colossians says about this amazing bright light that has come into your life. "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

How brightly the light of Jesus shines in Galilee as he calls fisherman to become his disciples and fish for people. He walks along the Sea of Galilee and sees two fisherman casting their nets. "Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately Peter and his brother Andrew who had been following Jesus, leave everything to follow him full time. The same thing happened to James and John. Jesus saw them mending their fishing nets. He called them to follow him and they left their boats and their father.

Jesus still calls on people to bring other people out of darkness into the light. What a privilege it is to be used by the Lord to bring people still living in darkness to the light. 1 Peter 2 says, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

How brightly did the light shine in this land of great darkness? "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." This past week I read these words to Carolyn Brunssen. Wouldn't it be special if Jesus came to our home when we are sick and healed us by placing his hand on us. Jesus did not leave us without a way to help people who are sick and need healing. He gives us the power of prayer. Over all the world this past week Christians have been praying for people and helping those who are sick. Think of how many prayers you were privileged to pray this past week.

It says that Jesus went throughout Galilee preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. This land of great darkness saw a great light shining brightly. That's still happening today throughout the world. People who are without hope are being led out of darkness into the light. In the darkest days of your life, Jesus has been there for you telling you again and again that you are in his kingdom and he is the King of kings and Lord of lords who is protecting you. In his kingdom, you know that nothing in all creation will ever separate you from his love. A bright light came into the great darkness in Galilee and a bright light has come into the darkness of your life. Now we live in the light of his love. Amen.