

Sermon, January 22, 2023

Matthew 4:12-23

“Darkness and Great Light”

This morning’s reading brings us to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He had just come from the wilderness, where he had been tempted by the devil three times. It is then that he hears that John the Baptist had been arrested. He then leaves his home in Nazareth withdrawing to the region of Galilee and settles in Capernaum in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Matthew tells us that he did this to fulfill a prophecy in the Book of Isaiah. It reads, “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan Galilee of the Gentiles - the people who live in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

When you are reading the New Testament ,and come across a quote from the Old Testament , it’s a good idea to go back to that book and read the quote in its context. This can help you better understand what is being said in the New Testament. In this case, the quote comes from the ninth chapter of Isaiah. The first verse of that chapter reads, “But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.” Why were these people in anguish? Because it refers to a time when that region was annexed by the Assyrians. This tells us why the Israelites.

“ lived in darkness”. In the Bible the word “darkness” often refers to oppression, so they are living under and suffering from Assyrian rule. But then why do they see a great light? Well, it is because this passage in Isaiah is believed to be a celebration of the rise of a new Judean king, probably Hezekiah. This brings us to the use of the word, “light”., which in this biblical context refers to royal relief from such oppression. They have gone from the darkness of oppression to the light of freedom.

So why does Matthew see this as prophecy? Well, in part, because the people in Jesus’ time are also living under the oppression of Roman rule, but now there has come a new king of sorts - although a very different kind of king, and his name is Jesus of Nazareth. (I should also point out that when the New Testament writers quoted From the Old Testament, they sometimes alter the words a bit to fit their message.) For example, in Isaiah he writes, “ those who lived in a land of deep darkness- on them light has shined.” But Matthew writes, “the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light” - but he then adds a line that is not found in Isaiah’s passage - it says, “and for those who sat in the region and the shadow of death light has dawned”. The word “dawned” is key here. It says something new has come - and again that something new is Jesus. Also, take note that Matthew specifically points out that Galilee is the land of Gentiles, which says that the new light that comes in Jesus shines beyond his own Jewish people. It shines for all who are trapped in darkness!

Our reading also says, "From this time Jesus began to proclaim: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near". Why had it come near? Again, because of the presence of Jesus. He will embody the values of the kingdom.

Now, as I have mentioned before, the words, "kingdom of heaven", might lead one to think he is talking about a place. Also note that the other gospels use the phrase, "kingdom of God". That is probably because Matthew was the most Jewish of the gospel writers, and therefore honored the Jewish belief that one should not speak or write the name of God. The phrase is best understood as the "reign of God", indicating that Jesus is talking about a world where the will of God reigns - or that the values that God desires for the world are present. So how are we to know what those values are? Well, Matthew follows the opening passage by telling the story of Jesus calling his first disciples, saying to them, "Follow me". We come to understand those values when we choose to follow him. And it is no mere coincidence that the very next chapter of Matthew begins the Sermon on the Mount - the core of the teachings of Jesus - that is, how we go about following him.

Now, going back to the words 'darkness' and 'anguish'. I have no doubt that everyone in this sanctuary has been through times of darkness in their lives, i.e., the darkness that comes with the loss of a loved one - the darkness of a serious or life-threatening illness - the darkness of depression and anxiety - the darkness of addiction- the darkness of unfulfilled dreams or times of having lost one's way in life. I know that I have had such times in my life, but also those times when I was able to scrounge up a little bit of faith and experienced the presence of the spirit of Christ - an experience that revealed a glimmer of hope off in the distance.

Earlier this week I was reading Dr. King's sermon called "I've been to the Mountain Top". It was the sermon he preached the night before he was killed. As I was reading, I came across a small sentence fragment that practically jumped off the page. It read "...only when it's dark enough, can you see the stars". What that said to me is that in those moments when we find ourselves lost in the dark, if we take a moment to look up - that is - to look to God, we can see those little glimmers of hope, and if we look long enough through the lens of faith - we too can become people who have seen a great light - the light of salvation! Amen.

Let us pray: God of great mercy and love, we praise your Holy Name, and thank you for this day that you have given us. We thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus, who reveals to us your great light. We have all had those times when the light seems to have gone out of our lives - when we find ourselves wandering in the dark unable to find our way. Yet, when we turn to you in our anguish, when we open our hearts and minds to the gift of faith, your Holy Spirit can lead us forward out of the dark into a new dawn. Teach us as well how we can best respond to your Son's call to follow him, and as we follow to learn and to embrace the ways of the kingdom - a kingdom filled with the bright light of hope, of faith, of justice and love...Amen.