

Isaiah 9:1-7

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined.*

*You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

*For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

*For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Matthew 4:12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to

them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

When I began working on this sermon a few days ago, our driveway was still mostly covered with ice and sleet. We could get out easily enough, as the frozen concoction was rather varied and crusty, and our vehicles both have good traction in the snow, not to mention that Cheryl and I both have plenty of experience driving in the snow. But driving on a frozen mix of mush is somewhat more treacherous, so we only went out when we thought it was necessary.

Fortunately, in this day and age of being connected to the world through our computers and smart phones, at least as long as we have power, we can work much more efficiently at home than we could 25 years ago.

By Friday, the sun had melted most of the frozen stuff on our driveway, but on Saturday morning, I awoke to a pre-dawn light outside our windows coming from the falling snow, something that we didn’t experience the previous week with the sleet and frozen rain.

The snow bathed our neighborhood in fluffy peacefulness, a peacefulness that continued to gently build during the day.

The Isaiah wrote today’s section of his great prophetic work at a time when the people of Israel were facing a military invasion from the Assyrian empire just to the north. The Israelite territories of Zebulun and Napthali, populated by descendants of the sons of Jacob who bore those names, bordered the Sea of Galilee and the northeastern boundary of Israelite territory, and were the first line of defense against the armies of Assyria.

Once the Assyrians invaded the Israelite Kingdom and overthrew their government, people from Zebulun and Napthali were the first to be carried away into captivity by the Assyrians. This event, which took place roughly seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, was so devastatingly traumatic for the people of these two Israelite tribes that these two names marking their status as two of the twelve tribes of Israel faded from common usage. By the time Jesus began his public ministry, what had been the lands of Zebulun and Napthali was simply the territory called Galilee.

Matthew’s Gospel was written for an audience that was primarily Jewish, people who would have known their Jewish history and the Jewish sacred writings, in which the prophet Isaiah figured prominently. They would have also known that the Hebrew word “Zebulun” was also a word that described what we know in English as a home or dwelling place. And in English, “Napthali” means the struggle to achieve something worthwhile.

Many New Testament scholars believe that Matthew referenced this passage from Isaiah to share the challenge to followers of the risen Christ to live as if the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst, as we come together to bring the light of Christ to brighten our little corner of God's creation for all people.

But just how do we bring God's light to our community when there is so much darkness seeking to overwhelm us, and fill us with fear and doubt?

Confession – Calling – Healing – Liberating – these are four of the primary concerns of the mission of the church today as described in Matthew's Gospel.

Confession: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." Christian minister and writer Frederick Buechner says that "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'"

Calling: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John were professional fishermen, which is to say that they made their living and provided for their families by fishing. In other words, they knew how to fish. Jesus called them, and there was something so compelling about his call that they dropped their nets where they were and followed. But when Jesus said, "I will make you fish for people," they didn't yet know that they would have to slowly but surely learn a totally new skill set over time.

Healing: "Jesus went through Galilee... curing every disease and every sickness among the people." The medical sciences have come a very long way in both understanding and treatment from the first rudimentary medical exploration by Greek philosophers in the Greek and Roman Empire. We know much about diseases of the body, treatments, and medications. And yet, we still struggle with diseases of the soul that lead to darkness, separation, division, violence, and domination. The church still has much work to do here, by bringing light into darkness, reconciliation into separation and division, and peace into violence and domination.

Liberation: "God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27 NRSV) The idea that God created every single human being in God's image is still one we humans struggle with.

But light to guide us in this struggle can be found in many places. I recently found one point of light in a New York Times article by opinion columnist David Brooks. In it, he compared the philosophical concept of humanism with the nihilist individualism currently running rampant throughout society and running our governments around the world. If you haven't heard of humanism before, here's a link to a helpful Wikipedia article:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism> -

Brooks says that essentially: "Humanism is anything that upholds the dignity of each person." The God-given dignity of each and every person on the face of the earth is the most basic grounding idea of the good news of the Kingdom of God. Liberation is simply liberation

from any human ideal that is grounded in one person or one group of people being better than or greater than another group. Sure, some people will have more of this or that or the other than other people. But that doesn't make anyone better or worse in the eyes of God. For those of us with more, it just gives us more responsibility to work to uphold the human dignity of those who may not have some of what we have.

I truly believe that if the church can re-ground itself in this simple, Kingdom of God idea, we can begin to move our societies back toward a more just and humane way of functioning in the world and fishing for people in the name of Christ by repenting, following, healing, and liberating wherever we go.

Note: I'll be working in bits and pieces of the idea of humanism from a Christian perspective into my writing and preaching over the next few months.

Stay warm and dry and safe during this period of wintry weather, and look out for the human dignity of all you meet each day.

Grace and peace to you all – Rev. Kirk Tutterow