

Land of Deep Darkness
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Isaiah 9:1-4

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

Matthew 4:12-23

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ ‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ 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.’

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

¹⁸ 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 lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³ 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.

There is not a time in human history that has not been perceived as one of deep darkness, nor a land which was not experiencing deep darkness. For every time and every place there are people who are suffering, people who are in anguish, people facing gloom, people receiving contempt. People who live in the region and shadow of death. Our reading from Isaiah hints at this, perhaps without even intending to. In speaking of the rejoicing the Israelites will do because of God's hand, Isaiah describes their joy like that of people who exult when dividing plunder. Well, this may be good news for the plunderers but what about the plundered? Deep darkness, great sorrow and pain. The same for those in Jericho when the walls came tumbling down. The same for all who were killed in the name of God. All those whom we are told were smote. There has always been deep darkness in lives. If you have ever seen photos of the wonder of the powerful randomness of a tornado, you know that one house can be destroyed while its neighbor feet away is unharmed. For one joy, for another darkness.

If there is always deep darkness, if there is always life in the region and shadow of death - and there is - the good news in this is that there is always a place for the good news of the great light that is Jesus Christ. Jesus' physical presence more than two thousand years ago was an obvious and tangible light to those in anguish who encountered him. If he walked toward your town, word got around and you could run and meet him on the road, perhaps watching him from the uplifted arms of a tree, or maybe reaching out to touch just the hem of his garment. People were witness to the healings, the teachings, the table-flipping and fig-cursing and demon-exorcising. The light was bright before their very eyes. It could be easy for us to hear the stories and lament that we were not there to be with him in person.

The thing about Jesus' light, though, the foundation of our faith and our call, is that Jesus' light didn't go out or leave with him when he was crucified. Like no other light, this light rubs off, sticks to, grows. Last week we heard, and this week we hear, about the calling

of Andrew and Peter as disciples; today we add James and John. We're learning here about the first ones who got this tenacious light all over them. And then Jesus got it on others and the disciples did, too - like honey or pine sap, it stayed on them **and** stuck to others. The spreading of this sticky light continued, and continues, and the light has not diminished but, instead, it grows with every new person on whom it rubs off.

You'd think with all the people smudged and smeared and coated in light that we might be blinded by its brightness during the darkness in life. There's another thing about this light, though. Sometimes we are the ones who cover it up. Sometimes we shade our eyes from it. Sometimes we choose to be among people who don't shine. This is no flaw of the light, of course. It can't help but blaze with brilliance. After all, it declares the kingdom of heaven has come near; it **is** the kingdom coming near. Even while we look away, the wholeness of creation is growing more and more complete; the restoration is shaping up to be grander than the original glory as the Creator and the creatures work together toward the re-new-al.

But we can miss this whenever we look into the darkness and think, "surely, it must win for it is so great." We miss this when we imagine, suspect, profess that our darkness is impervious to the light. We miss this when the darkness is broad, so broad, and fills the horizon, so much that we cannot imagine anything around or over or beyond it. At funerals I will often share the words of William Penn which read: "death is only a horizon, and a horizon is only the limit of our sight." So, too, the deep darkness and the region and shadow of death.

Jesus came into the darkness. We sing of his birth as being in the bleak midwinter. The Jews of the time would speak of the suffocating, demoralizing Roman oppression. They certainly could not see past it. And Jesus came. And he began to proclaim "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He proclaimed "Turn back to God and you will find that God has come even closer." "Look for the light and you will be surprised how readily you find it." Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. Those on whom the light spread did the same. And they would

not cover it up and they couldn't imagine shading their eyes from it and they ran, not walked, to spread the light instead of shy from it, for the world was hungry for it.

There is not a time in human history that has not been perceived as one of deep darkness, nor a land which was not experiencing deep darkness. For every time and every place there are people who are suffering, people who are in anguish, people facing gloom, people receiving contempt. People who live in the region and shadow of death. It is always time to uncover ourselves, to roll up our sleeves, to bare our hands and feet. It is always time to look for the light which so readily surrounds us. It is always time, not to walk, not to creep, definitely not to sit still, but to run with the light, as torch-bearers of the good news that the light we carry is the same one that shines in the darkness, the same one that the darkness cannot and will not overcome. It is time to shine throughout our own Galilees, throughout our Roman empires, in the bleak midwinter and in the valley of the shadow of death. It is time to shine. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: God, you come closer and closer and closer. Turn us around so we might see you and send us out so your light might shine from us, we pray. Amen.