

Matthew 4:12-25

**“From Darkness to Light”**

**Third Sunday after the Epiphany (A)**

January 22, 2023

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Have you ever been inside a cave or cavern? I have. Caves are a beautiful sight. It causes us to wonder how the stalactites, the stalagmites, and other cave formations came into being. Visiting a cave is certainly awe inspiring.

But what happens when the tour guide turns off the artificial light? From what I recall, nobody moves. Your mom may grab your hand just in case, but nobody is going anywhere. Suddenly, we are unable to see right in front of our own faces. We can't see where we could walk. We are all paralyzed in an all-encompassing darkness.

Eventually, the tour guide flips on his lighter. At last, there is light! But just in case, you may have noticed that the tour guide never lets go of the main light switch for the cave. So, just in case, he may drop his lighter, he can turn the lights back on.

Visiting a cave is certainly memorable. But can we really be comforted with the promise of artificial light?

***“The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light”*** (Matthew 4:16; Isaiah 9:2).

Today's gospel reading begins with the news of John the Baptist's arrest by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who sought the life of Jesus when He was a baby. When Jesus heard this news, He left Nazareth and moved to Capernaum. Did this news influence Jesus? Possibly. But, Jesus did not move to Capernaum to get away from Herod Antipas. You see, Herod Antipas ruled over the province of Galilee as well.

So, why did Jesus move there? Well, Capernaum was a great headquarters for Jesus' work. The shores of Galilee were thickly populated. In the many cities on the shore, He could reach many more people. In fact, Capernaum was also located on an important highway coming down from Syria, which eventually goes down to Egypt. Think of our highways today. There is a reason why businesses like to put up shop next to an interstate highway. It's all about location, location, location.

Add to the fact, Capernaum was a city He could reach out to Gentiles as well as to Jews. But ultimately Jesus took up residence in Capernaum so ***“that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:***

***“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned”*** (Matthew 4:14-16).

The people of Galilee were in a sad spiritual state because they were of a mixed race, and they were far removed from the temple in Jerusalem. The Jews there were often married to Gentiles and their faithfulness to God was often trumped by their spouse’s opinions, rather than God’s truth. So, to keep things happy in the family, religion was often watered down to find a compromise, or the false religion of the spouse reigned supreme. Now, Galilee was not all that different from Israel. For by and large, Israel was also living in darkness.

So, what was this “darkness”? The darkness that Isaiah refers to in his prophecy of Jesus is not physical darkness, but spiritual darkness. The gospel light had become lost to most of them. The faith in a Messiah with the sure hope of salvation was lost, both in Galilee and Israel.

In Galilee, most had forgotten about the promise of the Messiah. In Israel, the hope of the Messiah has greatly been replaced by a trust in the outward routine of worship and work-righteousness. Both Galilee and Israel were living ***“in the shadow of death,”*** a shadow of eternal death, an eternal separation from God.

Spiritual darkness remains to this day. We live in an ever-increasing dark world. It’s not that the sun (s.u.n.) is losing its power to give us light. It has nothing to do with “so called” climate change. It has everything to do with our hearts and minds.

Spiritual darkness is the state of a person living apart from God. Spiritual darkness means that a person is not in fellowship with God through Jesus Christ.

You see, from the very moment Adam and Eve sinned, humans have lived in a fallen world. All people are born in this fallen state of sin and separation from God. Everything God created as good has become corrupted. Our sinful pride, inherited from Adam and Eve, leads us to all sorts of evils against God and our neighbor.

Despite not knowing it, those who continually live in spiritual darkness get what their sins deserve: eternal death.

Today is Sanctity of Life Sunday and marks 50 years since the Roe v. Wade decision. Despite it being overturned last year, elective abortion continues in many states. But supreme court rulings and legislation do not change hearts. Rulings and legislation do not enlighten people. Only the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the Gospel has the power to change people's hearts.

Since Roe v. Wade made elective abortion legal at the federal level in 1973, more than 63 million children have died via elective abortion. Throughout those decades, the darkened world has pressed its pragmatic lies upon us. We hear about quality of life, potential disabilities, mental illness, rape and incest, and financial constraints on the mother or parents. The world shouts, *"Who would raise such a child?"* And these lies are driven right into our hearts and minds. Today, we continue to hear pragmatic lies: *"Would you rather have a trans kid or a dead kid?"* and *"Wouldn't you rather die with dignity than in pain?"*

We can see the darkness all around us. So many people are spiritually lost. So many are in that dark cave, that dark alley in their life, and they don't know where to go. They don't know Jesus and that He is their Savior. So, they seek earthly pleasures to dull the pain and escape from reality. We know of people who never go to church, and we know the people who go to church, but never take anything to heart. There is a lot of darkness to go around. Maybe you can see it in yourself.

We live in darkness. Where there is sin, there is darkness. Where there is sin, death follows. Death is constantly chasing us all the way to the grave. There is no way out. The death rate for sinners is 100 percent. Due to sin, we all die, but the only question is when?

***"The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light"*** (Matthew 4:16).

Within all this darkness, God the Father scatters the darkness through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Light. He is the Light because salvation is found only in Him and proclaimed by Him.

If we are to receive the Light, that is, believe in Jesus as the Savior and rejoice in His salvation, we have to be told about Him. So, Jesus begins to preach saying, ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"*** (Matthew 4:17).

The voice of John the Baptist had been silenced. From prison, John could no longer point to Jesus and say, “**Behold, the Lamb of God!**” But here is Jesus proclaiming the same message using those same words: “**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**” The only difference is that Jesus is saying that the kingdom is among us now. John prepared for the coming Kingdom and Jesus is the fulfillment of the Kingdom. Jesus is the Kingdom. And He would be coronated on the cross with the crown of thorns.

As the kingdom comes to us, Jesus says “**Repent!**” It’s time for us to repent. For we all have sin to repent of. In fact, it’s our whole person – *our whole self* – that we have to confess, since we are thoroughly corrupted by sin. So, we repent, as we acknowledge our sinfulness, confess it to God, and plead mercy to God for His forgiveness and help. And so, we receive His forgiveness. We receive the remedy for our sins that Jesus as the Lamb of God won for all people upon the cross.

Last week, we heard how John the Baptist directed his disciples to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We heard how Andrew and Peter immediately followed Jesus. But at first, this calling of discipleship did not involve giving up their occupation as fishermen and being with Jesus full time. Today, Jesus calls Andrew and Peter, and James and John to the apostleship, saying: “**Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men**” (Matthew 4:19). They didn’t think twice. They immediately dropped their nets and followed Jesus.

Andrew and Peter, James and John had no special qualifications to become an apostle. They were just fishermen. They likely didn’t have much of a formal education. Jesus called them not because of any special qualifications, but because He was so gracious.

From there, Jesus with His first four apostles, went throughout all Galilee. Jesus saturated Galilee. Everybody knew Jesus. He was teaching in the synagogues and preaching the Gospel. He was healing every disease and malady people had.

But ultimately, Jesus was known by His preaching.

We may see today’s Gospel text as something that has happened in the past. But *this* epiphany is still happening today. You see, we come out of the darkness to the light through the epiphany of preaching. God’s Word continues to reveal Jesus as the Christ and we see Christ through preaching.

Jesus says to His apostles and to us, ***“Follow Me!”*** Andrew and Peter, James and John, followed Jesus and in time, these fishermen, would bring more people into the net of the church, so others could learn from Jesus and follow Him.

One of the many ways Jesus brings us to Him is through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. You see, before Baptism, we were living in total spiritual darkness and under the complete rule and authority of Satan. But through the water and the Word in Baptism, we are restored as children of the light since we are rescued from the domain of spiritual darkness. This alone is the work of the Triune God – *the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* – that rescues us. So, we rejoice this day for Carter, who has joined the baptized by receiving from the Holy Spirit the power to believe in Jesus as His Lord and Savior.

Jesus, the Great Light, breaks into history through the preaching of His Word and the administration of the Sacraments. The kingdom of heaven is at hand as Jesus is present as our judge and Savior.

But we have a calling too. We have all been called to follow Jesus, learn from Him, and to tell of Jesus to others proclaiming the same message of Jesus, ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,”*** since the remedy to sin has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

Darkness no longer has the upper hand, since Jesus brought us out of darkness and into His Light. For by faith in Him, and trusting in His promises, Jesus sustains and preserves us. He is always present where He promises to be. Here! As we receive His healing Word of absolution and as we eat of His Body and drink of His Blood for the forgiveness of our sins! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +**