
“Those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” …When Isaiah wrote these words, the people of Jerusalem, and all Judah, must have truly felt like they lived in a land of deep darkness. The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen under the sway of Assyria, and the two had joined forces to attack Judah in overpowering numbers. The areas mentioned in the opening verse: Zebulun, Naphtali, and the land beyond the Jordan, had all become Assyrian outposts which included large portions of Israel, including the large freshwater lake called the Sea of Galilee. This was one in a series of threats to the survival of God’s People in the Promised Land – threats by empires too large, and too powerful, for Judah to resist for very long on its own. +++ But now, we come to chapter 9 of Isaiah and there is a new hope: the coronation of a new king: Hezekiah. This new king would restore a sense of legitimacy and competence to the throne, finally – he would restore the ideals of the Davidic monarchy – he would call on the People of God to repent of their past disobedience – and trust the Lord as a new age was dawning. +++ “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” +++ With Hezekiah on the throne, Jerusalem survived an Assyrian siege and then thrived. But Hezekiah is not the light – his coronation and success showed that God still reigns over all history. Hezekiah was called to put his own natural talents, his influence, and his faithfulness into the service of the Lord. It’s the Lord who saved them. Hezekiah was called into leadership, to offer hope, and to bring justice – to be an instrument of God. The king and many others committed their lives to serving the Lord – and the Lord’s light filled the darkness.

If there’s anyone who knows what it means to live in a time of deep darkness, it’s probably Peter, Andrew, John, James, and all the people they knew. They are Jewish fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, about 700 years after Hezekiah, during the time of Roman rule. It’s a life of subsistence, having to spend pretty much all day, every day, out on these boats just to put food on the table. I wonder how many times before this James and John had repaired those same nets – over and over again – just as they are the day Jesus shows up. Who could afford new nets at a time like this – if you could even find them? It’s a time when the only Jews that don’t struggle for a living are the ones who capitulate with the Romans. A time when the wealthy get wealthier and the poor are strewn across the countryside, forgotten – disoriented,… hungry,… sick,… angry. And now, we learn that John the Baptist has been arrested as the powerful are coalescing against the new kind of thinking represented by John and by Jesus. +++ +++ That’s the deep darkness that Jesus walks into – appearing, it seems, out of nowhere – and proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near…”; and it’s out of this deep darkness that he begins calling his disciples. – Matthew echoes the words of Isaiah, reminding us of that earlier time so long ago when the light of the Lord had shone into deep darkness – when folks like Hezekiah had been called to serve God at the dawn of a new age – to serve with all they had – with all of their skills – to play their role as God’s People were saved. +++ +++ Now, as Jesus Christ appears on the scene, much more than a new age has arrived: With Jesus, the kingdom of God itself truly is drawing near; the Divine Person… is present among us… remaking the world… +++ and starting here – with these unknown fishermen – …on the banks of this rural lake. +++ +++ +++ And they follow his call – dropping everything. Peter and Andrew, it seems, actually leave a net in the water. James and John walk away from their father – just walk away… - to follow Jesus. +++ +++ Deep Darkness in Ancient Israel. +++ Deep Darkness for the Jews in the Roman Empire.

And now, so many generations later, our world has its own deep darkness, doesn’t it? Poverty – a middle class sinking in debt – warming temperatures and rising waters – religions literally at war with one another… violent wars – a government so divided our leaders seem to spend more time and effort hurting each other than providing for the common good. And the list goes on… We could talk about our deep darkesses all day… And Who is called to reflect great light of Christ upon this darkness if not us – the Church – his Body in the world?

But it’s daunting. Jesus didn’t exactly deliver his disciples out of the darkness of their world, did he? Not in a worldly sense, he didn’t. Why should we expect any better? Discipleship would cost them everything – they would leave their families, their homes. They would risk, and often lose, their lives by following this man who was deeply disliked by the authorities. +++ They were still poor and often wouldn’t know where their next meal would come from as they followed Jesus across the countryside. They were still a persecuted class of resident in the land – still denied citizenship. +++ And none of that seemed to change much in any tangible, visible, worldly, way, when they followed Jesus. +++ For them, or for us, there’s no Pollyanna promise that any of us will be rewarded in this life with treasures of the world, for following Jesus. +++ I mean, let’s not forget that later Jesus himself was arrested and crucified. +++ +++ +++ At least when Hezekiah was called to lead God’s People against Assyria, there was a tangible outcome that everyone could see with their own eyes: Jerusalem stood – it never fell to the Assyrians.

So, what kind of light did Christ bring to the Land of Deep Darkness – what cause was so vital – so compelling – that people walked away from their lives for it? +++ Well, let’s turn back to our Scriptures… because Matthew answers our question by expanding on the nature of the darkness, beyond Isaiah. When Matthew quotes Isaiah, he changes it a little bit. Matthew
writes: – “and for those who sat in the region and shadow of DEATH … light has dawned.” +++ Truly a great light shines through Christ as he will overcome, Matthew tells us, the shadow of death itself. +++ +++ And when Jesus proclaims that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” – it’s not an exaggeration – he has ushered it in himself – a new kind of righteousness centered on loving God and loving each other. +++ Jesus doesn’t overthrow the status quo by raising an army in one grand swoop of his hand. He doesn’t place himself on a crown as the monarch of this Kingdom of God. +++ Instead, he reaches out to each individual and invites us to follow him – saving the world one person at a time. We see that at the end of our reading that Christ approaches ministry this way. Matthew tells us: – “Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the goods news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

That’s how he fished for people – by proclaiming the truth to them and loving them. +++ This is the ministry he is calling Simon, Andrew, James and John to – the ministry he calls each of us to this morning:: A ministry of compassion and love… a ministry of proclaiming the Good News that, in Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has arrived. +++ +++ And while this Gospel – might seem a little intangible to many… let us remember that worldly accomplishments are always fleeting – military victories like those of Hezekiah last only until the next battle. Yes, with Hezekiah as king, God saved Jerusalem from the hands of the Assyrians – but since then – between Hezekiah and the time of Christ – Jerusalem had fallen – to many enemies: to Babylon, to the Persians, to the Greeks, and now to the Romans. Worldly success is fleeting. But the defeat of death and our New Covenant in Jesus Christ will last forever.

But still, it does seem like a lot to ask, doesn’t it? When this passage, or the parallel passages from Mark and Luke, come up on the lectionary cycle each year, we often focus on the great sacrifice these first disciples made by dropping everything and following Jesus – and then how they should be an example to us, for putting Christ first in our lives. “If they can do it, so can you!” And, you know, there’s nothing wrong with that message. It’s all true. +++ But this morning, I’d like to think about it in a slightly different way. :: +++ You see, Hezekiah was born and raised to be a leader – to be a king. When God called him to his important work, it was to serve in that way – as a leader, a king – to do what he was ready to do – to be his best self. +++ When the Peter, Andrew, James, and John dropped their nets and followed Jesus – What does he tell them they’ll be doing? He could have said, “Follow me, and I’ll ask you to give speeches to groups of strangers, knock on doors of people you don’t know. I’ll ask you to walk for miles on hot dusty roads. When your training is complete, your job will include driving out demons. And, by the way, lots of people will hate you.” Now if they had followed that call it would surely would have been amazing. But that’s not what Jesus says to them. He tells them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” +++ These men had been fishing their whole lives. You can be a very successful disciple for Jesus by approaching it like a fisherman. It requires patience – it requires understanding where you choose to throw your net – it requires carefully drawing it in without dropping anyone on the way to the boat – and it requires preparing them for their new life after they join you on the boat. +++

See… I don’t think Christ is calling us to leave our lives behind in this passage. I don’t think Christ is asking us to become someone other than who we already are, to enter a life that feels strange and foreign and uncomfortable. I don’t think so. +++ No, Christ is calling us to be our best selves, to bring our own particular strengths and use them in his service. +++ And the GOOD NEWS is, it’s even better than that – when we do turn our full selves over to discipleship – when we really give it everything we’ve got – he will be there with us. +++ Jesus doesn’t tell his new disciples, “Follow me and you’ll figure out a way to use your fishing skills on people.” No – he makes a promise: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” +++

Here’s what Debi Thomas points out in her commentary on this passage: “If we’re going to follow him at all, we’ll have to do it in the unique particulars of the lives, communities, cultures, families, and vocations we find ourselves in,” Thomas writes. “We’ll have to trust that Christ prizes our intellects, our memories, our backgrounds, our educations, our skills, and that he will multiply, shape, and bring to fruition everything we offer up to him in faith from the daily stuff of our lives. I will make you,’ Christ promises the fishermen. I will take,… cultivate,… deepen,… magnify,… purify,… protect,… and perfect YOU – all the people God created you to be… +++ I will make you… fish for people. +++ [Fish for] people who are caught in the nets of exploitation, caught in the nets of corruption, caught in poverty, war, exile, homelessness, violence, disease, climate change, racism, sexism, homophobia… the list goes on and on and on. We will fish for people caught in all of these nets. What would count as Good News for them?” +++ What would count as Good News for the people of East Hampton? For the people of Long Island? +++

Jesus didn’t wait for these four disciples to find him – he went to them where they were doing what they do best. They hear him calling from the lakeshore and they respond – they leave their nets and follow – taking with them every skill they have, everything they are, everything they know – and make use of it all for him. +++ So, this morning, I wonder – what lakeshore is Christ calling you from? What part of your best self are you ready to give? What are you ready to work for – to fight for – with Jesus Christ by your side? How will you reflect his great light in this land of deep darkness?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.