

## Called to be Light

Isaiah 9:1-4 & Matthew 4:12-17 (18-23)

### *Third Sunday after Epiphany*

You know, it's almost easy to skip right over these verses in Matthew's Gospel, 4:12-17. They're tucked between Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and the calling of Peter and Andrew to fish for people. Right from the start of Matthew, the story has been moving along at a good clip. We have heard about the birth of Jesus, the visit of the Magi, the flight to Egypt, the killing of the innocents, the return from Egypt, Jesus' baptism, followed by his season of discernment and struggle in the wilderness. "Then the devil left him," were told, "and suddenly angels came and waited on him" (Mt. 4:11).

Which brings us to our text. "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee" (Mt. 4:12). We're not sure how much time passed between Jesus' recovery from his fast and when he got word about John. When he does hear of John's fate, Jesus decides to go to Galilee. And then Matthew gives us a kind of geography lesson and maps out Jesus' movements. He leaves Nazareth, his hometown, situated between modern-day Haifa along the coast, about twenty-seven miles to the west, and about twenty miles from Tiberias toward the east, situated along the Sea of Galilee. We don't know what route Jesus took to Capernaum, but the options were few. There was a major Roman road that linked Acre (now Haifa) on the coast with Tiberias, and from Tiberias there was only one road north, hugging the Sea of Galilee, which led to the fishing town of Capernaum, about ten, almost eleven miles from Tiberias. It's the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, one of the twelve tribes of Israel. It was not an exotic seaside resort area. Since the time of Isaiah, and before, it was known as a "land of deep darkness." It was a region devastated by the Assyrian invasion in the eighth century BCE. The Jewish historian Josephus (37-100), a contemporary of Jesus, tells us that around this time it was a region inhabited by faithless Jews, "Galilee of the Gentiles." This was not definitely not a Gentile region, but a Jewish one, with Jews that behaved as Gentiles, which, from a Jewish perspective, means faithless.

And so what a symbolic place, on so many levels, for Jesus to begin his ministry. He begins his work in a land long associated with darkness. And we know that in the first century, the region of the Galilee was an especially oppressive place during the Roman occupation. The Galilee of the Gentiles was full of Roman Gentiles, who imposed crushing taxes on the people, stole the fruits of their labor, and disregarded their faith.<sup>1</sup>

While it's easy to skip over these verses mapping places that are alien and distant for us—maybe that's why we skip over them because they sound foreign, containing yet another quote from Isaiah (9) inserted into Matthew's Gospel to note the fulfillment of prophecy—I think we need to pause here. Stop with Matthew—and Jesus—and really listen to what is being said in this text. The people of this region have seen a great light, Matthew tells us. What light? What is Matthew trying to say?

To answer this question, let's quickly look at the other Gospels. In Mark's Gospel, we really don't have many references to the word "light." In Luke, we have Zechariah's prophecy

that one will come after John the Baptizer. “By the tender mercy of our God,” he says, “the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk. 1:78-79). When Jesus was presented in the temple, in Luke’s Gospel, Simeon prayed to God, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk. 2:29-33). John’s Gospel gets right to the point. Jesus is that promised light. “In him was life,” John tells us in the Prologue, “and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn. 1:4-5). And later in John’s Gospel, Jesus claims to be greater than Apollo, the Greek god of sun and light. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus said. “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12).

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus never says, “I am the light of the world.” But what we do have in Matthew 4 is not a claim about Jesus, but a description of the church experiencing and encountering Jesus. *Light*. That’s what it was like being near him, following him, living with him, serving him. *Light*. Matthew’s Gospel was written by a community, church, an *ekklesia*—an *ekklesia* that experiences Christ as God’s light, God’s promised light shining forth in a dark world. His coming into the world is God’s light among us and within us. His light casts away the shadows of death and the fear that comes from living in the dark. His light comes into a dark world and illuminates it from within. This is the light that John the Baptist was waiting for, preparing his people to receive. This is the light that Matthew’s church felt and experienced around him, with him.

The presence of Christ signals that a new day is dawning, a new eon, the turning of the ages, the coming of God’s kingdom—that is, God’s realm or domain or empire, whichever word you want to use—has come on the scene, erupted into space-time as if from nowhere, ushering in God’s redemptive presence in a manner never before witnessed by the nations of the world.

The coming of his light signals the turning, the turning of hearts and minds toward God’s light, and the *overturning* of principalities and powers and ideologies and demonic forces in the halls of power that stand in the way of God’s desire to bring renewal and healing and resurrection. It’s as we sang back in Advent, *The Canticle of the Turning*, paraphrasing Mary’s song of praise, the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55). “My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.”<sup>2</sup>

Pay attention. The world is about to turn. Don’t you see the light of this new day. It’s on the way and it’s here. Jesus is the turn. His coming marks time. With Jesus it’s always: before and after. “From that time,” Matthew tells us, “Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent....’” *Apo tote*, in Greek, “from then on.” Marking time, a shift. “Began to preach...,” and “began” here means a “fresh start,” the beginning of an action that continues indefinitely. And what did he preach? *Metanoite*. Repent, change, transform, turn—turn around. In fact—and this is key—you’re now free to turn, to change. Why? Because “the kingdom”—the realm, the empire of God—“has come near.”

And the order is very important here—it's often overlooked by many Christians, especially television evangelists or revivalist preachers. Jesus doesn't say we have to repent in order to enter the kingdom of God. Matthew tells us the light has already come, the kingdom has drawn near, *therefore* repent. The presence of God's kingdom gives us the assurance that we *can* repent, that we can let go of one way of being and living in order to embrace something new. The order is even clearer in Mark's Gospel: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk. 1:14-15).

Getting the order correct is really important. Theologian T. F. Torrance (1913-2007) made clear again and again in his writings, "There is, then, an evangelical way to preach the Gospel and an unevangelical way to preach it. The gospel is preached in an unevangelical way, as happens so often in modern evangelicalism, when the preacher announces: this is what Jesus Christ has done for you, but you will not be saved unless you make your own personal decision for Christ as your Savior. Or: Jesus Christ loved you and gave his life for you on the Cross, but you will be saved only if you give your heart to him."<sup>3</sup> This is not the gospel of unconditional grace, but something else. Ironically, we could say, there are many evangelicals who need to become truly evangelical. You have to get the order correct. If you get it wrong you end up in a theological wasteland. Reformed and Lutheran theologians call this the "order of salvation," the *ordo salutis*. In other words: Here is the good news. The light is shining in the darkness. Now step out from the shadows. Turn and live in the light. Reflect the light of God. Because now you're free to follow!

Free to follow because we've been called. Called to reflect Christ's light in the world. Called to be light to the world. Christ wants us to be light – his light. And we hear this right at the beginning of his ministry in the Sermon on the Mount, found only in Matthew: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:14-16).

Called to be light—every follower of Christ is called to be light, as well as every church. *This* church. This is who we are by virtue of Christ's call. And this is what we're called to be. It is fitting on this Sunday of the Annual Congregational Meeting, as we present the reports of the boards and committees and councils of this church, that we understand the work we have done and are doing together as part of that larger light of Christ. At the risk of sounding boastful—we are the light of the world. You are the light of the world. Not the only light, mind you, we're part of the larger light of Christ. Still we need to remember who we are and what's within us and what we we're about and all that we have done and are doing as children of light: in *this* church, in the way we live and care for one another, in *this* community, in *this* world. Actually, I think that Jesus really wants us to claim our identity, claim a kind of sanctified pride. Perhaps this makes you uncomfortable. It might sound like boasting. But it's not bragging if it's true. Don't hide. In fact, if we did a better job of claiming our identity, accepting our acceptance as light, leaning into God's grace, opening our hearts to the flow of God's love and the movement of the Spirit, there's no telling what God will accomplish in us and through us.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1926-1968) once asked, “Why is the church always a taillight rather than a headlight?” Why indeed. Sometimes we’re even a brake light, putting the brakes on what God desires for the world. Why are we so obstructionist? Why do we come up with so many excuses? Why is it so easy to be negative and critical and fall into despair, mourning for the church of the past, the church that was—which is not a faithful response? We’re called to be here and now. In *this* time. And in this time we’re called to shine. We’re not the source of light. We don’t “own” the light. But we can follow it. Be servants of it. Reflect it. Be a conduit of it, help direct it. And in serving, reflecting, directing we take on something of that light and become light.

Facing forward, the church can help light the way ahead for those who sit in darkness. I believe this, don’t you? The church can be a light through dark times. I have to believe this. Not that I’m forced to believe it, but I choose to in hope. In fact, the church has yet to live out its potential. What if our best days are not in the past, but in what lies ahead?

The kingdom is at hand.

The light has dawned.

Turn, follow, serve.

Jesus said, we’re here to be God’s light.

Light that brings out all the God-colors in the world.

This is the good news.

Now shine.

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> “Canticle of the Turning.” Text by Rory Cooney, set to a traditional Irish melody, Star of the County Down. *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 92-95. Tom Torrance’s son, Iain Torrance, former president of Princeton Seminary, preached in the Catonsville pulpit several years ago.