

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. <sup>13</sup> Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— <sup>14</sup> to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

<sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,  
the way to the sea, along the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles—  
<sup>16</sup> the people living in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
a light has dawned.”

<sup>17</sup> From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

<sup>18</sup> As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him.

<sup>21</sup> Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, <sup>22</sup> and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:12-23)

### Jesus Breaks the Darkness

When I was in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, we had a discussion in school about seeing in the dark. I remember saying that I could see in the dark just fine. My teacher said, “Well, you’ve probably never been in total darkness.” I didn’t believe it at that time, but of course, he was right. Today, especially if you live in an urban environment like we do, total darkness is rare. Street lights and car lights and lighted signs provide enough light that even in our homes at night, it’s almost never totally dark. So sometimes, it’s hard for us even to imagine what it would be like to have no light at all. But when you actually encounter total darkness, you realize just how helpless you are. You can’t find anything. You can seriously injure yourself by tripping over something. God uses that image for life without Christ. Every one of us is lost in darkness until the Light of the world comes. **Jesus breaks the darkness!**

**I. He breaks the darkness by his own words and actions.**

**II. He breaks the darkness by his church’s testimony.**

#### I.

What we’re talking today is Jesus’ ministry. Matthew tells how Jesus began to preach and teach in Galilee, the northern part of Israel. Jesus left his hometown and made his headquarters in Capernaum, a substantial fishing village on the Sea of Galilee. But he didn’t go there for the fishing. He used that town as a home base to travel throughout that northern part of Israel to preach the gospel.

That’s where the light comes in. Matthew quotes Isaiah who spoke of “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Gentiles are non-Jews – people like most of us. But Galilee was a part of Israel. So what did Isaiah mean? Well, Jerusalem was the religious heart of the nation of Israel, and Galilee was as far from Jerusalem as you could get without leaving Israel. Ever since ancient times, it had been infected by the influence of the Gentiles who were closer. It was a major invasion route when Gentile armies came into the country. It always had a Gentile minority that resisted Israelite customs and religion. At the time of Christ, many Gentiles lived there.

So God said, “**The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.**” The darkness is unbelief. It’s ignorance about Christ. Those people living up there in the north, away from the temple and close to all those foreign gods and all that foreign thinking, were living among people in total darkness. But God sent them light: Jesus’ ministry. The people who lived among unbelievers and were most susceptible to picking up their ideas about God and about life, those were the very first people that Jesus preached to.

But why did Jesus preach at all? Even though I've only been your pastor for a few years, you've heard me tell you again and again that Jesus was born into this world to die, to pay for our sins and then to rise and give us eternal life. That's absolutely true. Nothing else that Jesus did would matter without his death and resurrection. So why didn't Jesus just go to Jerusalem and do what he came here to do? Why did he even start preaching in Galilee – and continue preaching for three years before he finally went to the cross?

Very simply, so that going to the cross would help us. What Jesus did for us does us no good if we don't know about it. Jesus died and paid for every sin that every sinner ever has committed or ever will commit. On the cross, he suffered the hell and then the death that the whole human race has coming. When he rose, God wiped out all our sins. But if I don't trust in that, then I'm going to insist on standing before God on the basis of my own good works. I'm going to tell God that I'm a good person. That I tried to help people. That I tried to be a good father, a good husband, a good pastor. I'm going to tell God that I didn't sell drugs to school kids or turn away people who were hungry. I'm going to point out that I held elevator doors for little old ladies using walkers and I was pleasant even to telemarketers when they interrupted my dinner.

You know what? God's going to tell me that none of that matters, because I was still a sinner. Because sin has totally blinded me to spiritual truth, I was born thinking that God likes "good people" and he takes them all to heaven. And it just isn't so, because to God there are no good people. There are only sinners who deserve to pay for their sins. No matter how much good we think we've done, it doesn't erase our sins. It doesn't change the laws that we have broken. Thinking it does is the worst kind of spiritual darkness. The light only comes when God proclaims that our Savior died and rose and set us free. Through that light, he pierces the darkness that covers our hearts and he makes us believers. He makes us trust in Jesus.

Jesus himself began the process of shining that light on the world, starting in the part of Israel farthest away and most susceptible to the kind of darkness the world around us brings. Just to make sure they got the point, Matthew says, "**Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.**" Jesus preached – he called us to repent, because the kingdom of God is near. We all will have to stand before God and be judged. You want to stand with Christ and know that your sins are paid for. But for that to be true, Jesus has to be the Savior who takes away our sins. To prove that he was that Savior Jesus healed every disease and sickness among the people. Those diseases show sin's power over us, by all the pain and sorrow they cause. When Jesus healed them, he showed his power over sin, his power to set us free from death and hell. He was showing the light he came to proclaim. To this day, we still hear about Christ and his work. We still see our Savior preaching and teaching so that we know who it was that the Romans crucified three years after this, and who it was who burst out of the tomb: Jesus the Christ, the Son of God come for us. My friends, **Jesus breaks the darkness by his own words and deeds.**

## II.

But even while Jesus was preaching and teaching and healing, he knew that he was not going to stay around and do this forever. The human race got three years of Jesus walking this planet and proclaiming the good news and then he ascended back to heaven. But he did not let the darkness overwhelm the light he ignited when he called his people to repent and to trust in him. Jesus made provision for the light to continue: he established the New Testament Church. Do you see that in this reading? It's there, when Jesus called his disciples.

In this reading, we see him calling Peter, Andrew, James and John. These are four of the twelve total disciples Jesus called. Later he named them apostles. Judas fell away and even later Jesus added St. Paul. But this was God's plan to spread the light because he used them to found the New Testament Church. The Bible says that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone. Jesus called them so that when he returned to heaven, he could work through them to bring light to the world.

Now, it may seem like a pretty risky plan. Most of these men were fishermen or other ordinary workers. Very few of them had much formal education, which seems like a big drawback for people who were going to write the New Testament. None of them were rich or influential. But Jesus entrusted his entire plan of bringing light to the world, to them. And it worked! For two thousand years, the light has gone out into the world. Millions of people today know their Savior.

Why has it worked? Because the light Jesus gave them wasn't theirs, it was his. No matter how much they messed up, he was still working. That is so important today, because we are the heirs of those men that Jesus sent out. God has given the gospel to us. And he calls us to share it with the entire world. Guess what? We don't always do a good job of that. Sometimes, we're just too scared to talk to someone about Jesus – even our own kids. Sometimes, we choke when we have the opportunity. Sometimes, we aren't even willing to invite people to church so that they can hear for themselves. Worse even than that, sometimes, we aren't committed enough to our mission to support it with our time and our offerings. We want our church to grow. We want our kids to hear the gospel in a Lutheran elementary school and even in a Lutheran high school. We want our synod to send out missionaries. But we don't want to pay for it. We think somebody else will do that, and our ministry struggles. Or we just don't pay enough attention to realize how much our congregation is struggling to do the work God has called us to do. And so we are not faithful in giving our time and our wealth back to the Lord.

God has given us so much. Why is it so hard for us to give back to him? You know the answer – you've heard me say it over and over again: it's hard because we're sinners. At our core, we're selfish, no matter how good we think we are. That's part of that darkness we were born in. That darkness remains in our hearts, even after Christ shines the light on us. The darkness retreats, but it doesn't leave us while we live in this world. The shadow of pride and sin are always there inside us. So we don't want to hear about financial issues. We don't want to hear that it's our job to shine the light of Christ. We don't want to consider whether we are doing our part, as God calls us, to support the work of the church. That sin and selfishness deserves death and hell. Not one of us is free from it. I am not. Neither are you.

But that darkness inside us is not the end of the story. Jesus died and rose for our sin and selfishness. Jesus died and rose because we don't want to talk about him ourselves, because we're embarrassed even to tell our own children about the Lord. Jesus died and rose because we don't want to participate in the work our congregation is trying to do and we don't want to examine whether we are truly bringing a generous offering. Jesus died and rose for the resentment we feel when our pastor brings it up. Jesus took all that sin away. God has forgiven you and me for our selfish hearts. We will not go to hell. We will live with him. That's the light of Christ. And God gave that light to us.

Just as we are forgiven, God now calls us to share the light with others. That's his only plan to spread the light throughout the world. Knowing how hard it is for us to do a good job at that work, we might think the Church would've been better off if Jesus had stayed to do the work himself. But he is doing the work, my friends. Every time you hear the law and it strikes your heart, that's Jesus working, along with the Holy Spirit and God the Father. I can't make you feel the heat of God's wrath – he does that, because he built his power into the law. And when you hear that Jesus loves you, when you hear that he died and rose and took your sins away, when you hear that he will not punish you, but will take you home with him and that message comforts you, that's not me either. That's Jesus working through the gospel, the very power of God. Every day that we gather here, he is working. Every time the bell rings in our school here or at HVL, Christ is there with us. And whatever success we have is his. We do the talking, we bring the offerings, we dedicate our time but he does all the work. He changes hearts. And he does that through the gospel. Our only job is to share it. **Jesus breaks the darkness by his Church's testimony.**

Many churches have the tradition of a candlelight service on Christmas Eve or on New Year's Eve, like we do. If you've ever been to one of those services, have you ever noticed how very small children react to the candles shining in the darkness? They can't take their eyes off them. Even babies will stare at those lights with rapt attention. That's why light is such a good image for Christ. In the darkness of sin and hurt and loss, Jesus shines for us with love and forgiveness and hope. He breaks the darkness and brings us home to him. Focus with rapt attention on that light. Amen.