

Those Living in Darkness See a Great Light!

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— ¹⁴ to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶ 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.”

¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.”

²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ 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, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Are you OK? I ask because last Monday was Blue Monday. A professor by the name of Dr. Cliff Arnall came up with this in 2005. He was trying to figure out what would be the gloomiest, most depressing day of the year and he came up with the third Monday in January. Here is his reasoning: “Credit card bills are a big problem after Christmas. Snow, ice and floods are causing worries, and many feel a lack of motivation.” Well, if you were not depressed Monday, maybe you are now! To be honest, no one would have heard of Blue Monday if it wasn’t for a travel agency in England who used it to sell vacation packages, a marketing stunt. But there is an element of truth to it.

Our gospel reading addresses gloomy days. It uses the phrase, “... **those living in the land of the shadow of death.**” And it doesn’t limit it to one day a year. It means every day of the year and every year. And it is worse than debt or bad weather. It is called the shadow of death. But our text doesn’t just draw our attention to this darkness. It gives us every reason to rejoice that a light has dawned. That light is Jesus Christ.

I. *The darkness is severe.*

We need that light because the darkness is that bad. ¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— ¹⁴ to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶ 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.” When Israel conquered the promised land, God had a plan to divide up the land between the twelve tribes. Each tribe would draw a lot or number out of a hat and that number told them which piece of land they would call home. The family of Naphtali and the family of Zebulun got land around and above the Sea of Galilee. This meant that Zebulun and Naphtali occupied the northern most boundary of Israel.

That was fine and dandy, but some problems arose. The north was the gate or door into or out of Israel. So most invasions came through Zebulun and Naphtali. Assyria invaded through here, exporting some of the people and importing some of their own. The Greeks under Alexander invaded and settled many Greek gentiles there along with their Greek vices and worldviews and pagan religion.

What was the result of all of this? The landscape and people bore the scars of invasions. It was melting pot of many different peoples. That is why they were called, “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Sure, there were still true Israelites there, some synagogues, but it was spiritually desolate, a wasteland.

When I described Naphtali and Zebulun and how they were influenced by the unbelieving world, did you make any connection between them and our world today? If we don’t, then maybe we are becoming accustomed to the darkness ourselves. You know the gospel in a nutshell, John 3:16: **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.** That’s the good news. But continue reading John 3. ¹⁹ **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.** ²⁰ **Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.** Sadly, people love living in darkness. They love to live

without God, to do their own thing. Others are afraid of Church, of Jesus, of the Bible because they are afraid to admit that they like the darkness.

If I was a psychologist, I might tell you to get comfortable with yourself. But Jesus is no psychologist. He is the Son of God who has come to save us. And what does he say to those who are living in darkness? Repent.

II. A great light has dawned.

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. Let's say Target wants to build a superstore southwest of here, in the New Rome area. Oh, we would appreciate it. But that makes no business sense. There is no way they can draw enough customers to make a go of it.

Jesus wasn't adopting a typical business model. He went to the least important, confused and messed region, Galilee. He picked up where John left off. ¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the exact same sermon John the Baptist preached. In fact, I will suggest that this could be the theme for every sermon every Sunday. Repent. Repent means to turn around or change your mind. It is for sinners. The absolution I spoke at the beginning of the service is not for the good people. It is for those who confessed their sins. Parents bring babies to the Baptism because they know they are sinners and need forgiveness. Folks come to Communion because they need assurance their sins are forgiven. Church is not for good people. It is for the sinners. It is for those who want to turn around.

And repent for what? **The kingdom of heaven has come near.** The coming of the kingdom is like April 15, tax day. For those who owe a lot of taxes, it is a day of dread. But if you know you are going to get a refund, and a hefty one at that, then you can't wait for that day to come. You may even file your taxes.

The kingdom of heaven being near should be a day of dread for sinners. No more hiding their sins. No more denying them or Christ. But for those who do repent, it is a day of celebration. It is good news. That is why he described that experience to a father who welcomed back a very wicked, wayward, lost son. He told them about a shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep. It is God being born as a man who would then die the death of the sinner, for the sinner.

"Repent," and the "Kingdom of heaven is near," are the most important words that people in darkness can ever hear. Jesus makes sure we hear it today.

III. The light still shines.

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ 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, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Just as Galilee, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, was an unlikely place to start his preaching, Jesus' choice of disciples was just as unusual. He didn't go to the seminary to look for promising, young candidates. He chose common folk, blue collar workers. This is not the first time they met Jesus. They had known him for about a year. Jesus is now calling them to become full time workers in his kingdom. And they accepted the call. All four left their jobs. They left their families. And what do you think was the theme of their sermons? Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. Jesus said these fishermen will fish for men. We saw Peter on Pentecost cast his net and catch 3000 souls.

I really hope some of our young people would consider the full time public ministry. Maybe I have to talk about it more. But for those of us who stay in Arlington, we can learn a bit from these four fishermen. God doesn't tell you to quit your jobs. But he still calls you to follow him. Note how they left everything behind, their nets, boats, their means of making money, their family and followed him even though they had no idea of where he is taking them. That takes faith. We can do the same. We can abandon all to follow him even if you still live in your house and you still go to your job. You do this when you no longer conform to the pattern of this dark world, and instead you become transformed in Christ. John gave us beautiful example in our epistle reading earlier. We live as Jesus did, as we love as he loves, no longer hating a brother or sister. It means you are willing to leave it all behind like one takes off his winter coat when he comes into the house.

And finally, you may not be called to be an apostle, but you still have your own nets. We have our own lakes where we can cast those nets. In three weeks we will have our friendship Sunday. What a time to cast your net. All you have to do is invite them.

I wish I could tell you that spring will come this week, but I can't. In fact, all the things that Dr. Arnall described as Blue Monday are true, and that is the tip of the iceberg. We have more gloomy things to deal with beside a couple credit card debts. We live in the shadow of death. But Christ has come, and he shines a light that brightens even the gloomiest of days. Let him shine on you and shine him on others. Amen.