

**+ Matthew 4:12-23 + The Light Shines in the Darkness +
+ 2nd Sunday after Epiphany: Mission Festival + 22 January 2017 +**

There is something unsettling about darkness. You can't see well in the dark. You can't see what's in front of you, what's behind you, or what's around you. You don't know if you should slow down or speed up or stop where you are. You can easily get disoriented. Walk down a dark path or through a dark building sometime and you'll know what I mean. Yet turn on a light and suddenly the darkness isn't so unsettling anymore. You can see everything!

There is something frightening about darkness. You can't see well in the dark. You can't see how close or far away from danger you really are. You don't know what, if anything, is lurking out there in the shadows. Is it any surprise that little ones get scared of monsters in their closets or under their beds at night? Plus when do criminals typically work? For centuries, they've often worked under the cover of darkness so no one can see them. Yet all it takes is one light to shatter the darkness and make the shadows disappear.

Darkness doesn't even have to be total to have a negative impact. The increase in darkness and lack of sunlight in the winter is a reason why people can develop a seasonal form of depression known as Seasonal Affective Disorder. Yet the days are getting longer and the sun is shining more.

Now there is some beauty in darkness, but what usually makes darkness beautiful? Light! Go out to a darkened field away from city lights and look up. What do you see? The sky awash with the twinkling light of stars and planets and meteors. Or what about the beauty of a full moon or the sky-brightening lights of a distant city or town? Light makes darkness beautiful.

When Jesus began preaching and teaching in the region of Galilee, it wasn't an outwardly dark time. The days were neither short nor the nights long. Jesus wasn't preaching and teaching at night, but in broad daylight. Yet it was a time of darkness in a world filled with blinding darkness.

You see, a light shining in the darkness of this sinful world was about to be snuffed out. John the Baptizer ***"had been put in prison..."*** After 400 years of dark silence, John had suddenly appeared on the religious scene in Israel like a blazing torch in the darkness of a starless night. The Lord had given John the responsibility of calling Jew and Gentile alike to repent or turn away from their sins because the long-promised Savior was coming soon.

When Jesus arrived, John pointed him out as ***"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."*** (John 1:29) John even had the privilege of baptizing or inaugurating Jesus into his public ministry ***"to fulfill all righteousness."*** (Matthew 3:15) John reflected the light of Christ like the moon reflects the light of the sun, but an executioner's axe would soon snuff out John's light forever. John had spoken against the wicked act of the local ruler, Herod Antipas. Herod didn't like that, so he had John tossed in prison and planned to have him executed.

John's imprisonment wasn't the only cause of such thick darkness. Uncertainty and fear filled people's hearts. The thick blindness of unbelief left many groping around for the right way to heaven, freedom from their guilt, rescue from their pain, and deliverance from their sin. For some, the thick darkness of legalism left them fruitlessly trying to earn God's favor day after day. For others, the thick darkness of their selfish desires left them battered and bruised by the consequences of sinful action after sinful action. Over all of them loomed the ***"shadow of death"*** and the reality that according to God's holy Law, ***"the wages of sin is death..."*** (Romans 6:23a)

Into that unsettling and frightening darkness stepped the Light of the World. Matthew puts it matter-of-factly, ***"When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah..."*** Into that unsettling and frightening darkness, Jesus traveled from Nazareth, the town of his childhood, to a fishing town by the Sea of Galilee called Capernaum. Capernaum was in an area where there were people of all kinds of different backgrounds. People from all over the known world traveled through that area along major trade routes. There the bright rays of the Son of God broke forth and began shattering the darkness of sin and its effects.

Matthew makes a direct connection between what we heard earlier from the prophet Isaiah and the arrival of the Light of the World. ***"Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—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."*** Into the darkness of sin and death, the Light was shining for all to see.

Matthew shows us how the Light of the World was shining in the darkness. The first way was through Jesus' preaching. His message was simple and it was clear. ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*** The Light, that had given life to all creation, had come into this sin-darkened world to give life to all those lost in the shadow of death. Jesus called to people everywhere—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, young and old, rich and poor—to turn from their sins and live. Why? The only path to heaven, the only source of real forgiveness and peace, the only fount of truth, the only light in the darkness was right there in front of them. Jesus came to scatter their darkness, to show them the way to heaven through him.

The Light of the World was shining in the darkness. That's why Jesus called people to follow him so his light could go out to still others. Matthew tells us that one day while Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, ***"he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew."*** They were professional fishermen who were ***"casting a net into the lake..."*** When Jesus found them, he told them, ***"Come, follow me...and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed him."***

Jesus was only getting started. A little farther down the coast, Jesus ***"saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John."*** They, too, were professional fishermen. They were on shore ***"preparing their nets"*** in the boat with their father Zebedee. Jesus invited them to follow him and, like Simon Peter and Andrew, they left everything behind—even dear, old Dad in the boat. These four men were the first of Jesus' disciples.

So what was so significant about calling those four fishermen to follow him? Yes, the Light of the World changed their lives forever scattering their own darkness like every other believer, but Jesus had a job for them and those he called after them. They would take the Light of the World out into the world three years later after Jesus had suffered and died for the sins of all people and had victoriously risen from the dead. As Jesus said, they would be ***"fishers of men"*** rather than fishermen. They would take the good news of Jesus to sinners, to families and communities and peoples and nations, who in turn would spread that Light of Christ to still others living in darkness. That Light would keep spreading. Why? Because Jesus scatters the darkness of guilt with his forgiveness earned by his own sacrifice on the cross. Jesus destroys the gloom of death by his own victory over the grave.

The Light of the World was shining in the darkness, and those disciples witnessed that actually happen as Jesus healed body and soul alike. Matthew tells us, ***"Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."*** As a demonstration that he truly was the Light of the World, Jesus healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf. He cast out demons, made the paralyzed walk, and even raised the dead, but nothing healed more than ***"the good news of the kingdom"***—the good news that Jesus had come to save sinners.

Our world still looks pretty dark, doesn't it? I'm not talking about the long nights and concrete gray skies of winter. The sinful world around us seems to try everything it can to snuff out the beautiful light of Christian faith in your heart and mine. Whether it plays to your natural selfishness or greed or lust or violence, whether it tries to pressure you into compromising your faith or attacking it, being a Christian who confesses that the Bible is the Word of God from beginning to end is difficult. In some parts of our world, being a confessing Christian can be the difference between life and death. Satan constantly tempts us. Our sinful natures want to drag us down whatever dark path seems most exciting at the time, while the shadow of death looms over us all. Yet into our unsettling and frightening darkness steps the Light of the World.

The message that you and I proclaim and that pastors and teachers and missionaries and lay people proclaim all over this continent and around the world is no different than what Jesus proclaimed 2,000 years ago. ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*** "Turn from your sins and live, because the only Way to heaven, the only Source of real forgiveness and real peace and actual truth, the only Source of healing for your sin-sick soul, the only true Source of Light in this dark world is right here in Jesus."

Like Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, Jesus calls you and me to serve in a very specific way. "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men." "Follow me and witness how my Light scatters the darkness of unbelief and guilt and pain and death in your life. Then reflect my Light like the moon reflects the light of the sun. Let my Light shine through your gracious words and your selfless, loving actions, and then share my Light! Shine it brightly in the lives of the people you know and love. Help others to shine my healing Light, my forgiving Light, my life-giving Light not just here, but in other communities, other states, other nations around this sin-darkened world. Encourage your children to hear my call to serve, to bear my light to other parts of this world—to classrooms and congregations and mission fields. Keep coming back to my Light through my Word and then take my Light again to your homes and neighborhoods and communities."

The Light of Jesus shines in the darkness, and the darkness isn't so unsettling anymore. The Light of Jesus shines in the darkness, and the darkness isn't so frightening anymore. Everyone needs to see that Light—no matter who they are, where they come from, or how much or how little melanin pigment they have in their skin. Everyone needs to see that Light of life, that Light of forgiveness, that Light of truth, that Light of peace, and that peace is ours to share. May we reflect that Light and live in that Light of Christ all the days of our lives! Amen.