

Matthew 4:12-23 ¹² Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵ “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.” ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. ²³ And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

We find Jesus in our text for today beginning the Galilean phase of his ministry. Remember, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River not far from Jerusalem. That is located in the southern part of Israel. After his baptism, Jesus remained in that region for a brief period of time, preaching and teaching and his disciples were baptizing. Then Matthew tells us that Jesus heard John the Baptist was put into prison. So Jesus left that area and went north to the region of Galilee. As Jesus began the Galilean phase of his ministry in our text, Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah. ¹⁶ *the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.* 700 years before Jesus was born, Isaiah predicted he would come to this very region to announce his gospel message.

Note that Isaiah calls this region of Israel the “land of darkness.” In Isaiah’s time, the most powerful nation in the world was Assyria. Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and carried the Jews who lived their off into captivity. The Assyrians then replaced the Jews with people they had conquered in other regions. These people brought their false religions with them and proceeded to mix the teachings of God with the false beliefs from their homelands. For this reason Isaiah notes the land became known as a place of darkness, spiritual darkness.

We should fix our attention today first on that concept of spiritual darkness, for we find that it is present in our world everywhere we look. This darkness presents us with both the privilege and the opportunity Jesus has given us. Perhaps an example is helpful. Many years ago, I met a woman whose life was filled with that darkness. At the time I was starting a mission church in

Rhode Island. One Sunday morning, one of my members urged me to visit his aging aunt who was a lapsed Catholic and was not attending any church. So I went to visit her and she welcomed me into her home. We had a great visit. She served milk and cookies. I stayed for almost an hour. The conversation seemed promising, so I went to see her every week. Every week she would serve milk and cookies and we would have great conversations about many things. We talked about the weather, the Red Sox, her family, places she had been. However, there was a problem. Whenever I would try to bring up the topic of religion, she would change the subject. She would not talk about the Bible, about Jesus, about faith, not even about her church upbringing. Two months of this went by and the only progress I could measure was in my waistline after 5 lbs of cookies. So after two months I stopped visiting.

Almost two years later, my member told me in church that his aunt was in the hospital. She was dying and she asked to see me. I went to the hospital and found the woman sitting in a rocking chair in her room. Since I had not seen her for almost two years, I began by trying to make small talk as I had before. I noted how the Red Sox were doing lately. It did not take more than two minutes to see that she was not interested in the Red Sox just then. She continued to rock in her chair, and she was very agitated. I noted that she seemed upset and I asked her what was wrong. The woman responded by saying that she was dying and that God was not going to like her. I responded by asking her why God would not like a kind old lady like her. And she responded at once with no hesitation, "Because I am not a kind old lady. All my life I have been selfish and mean, even with my nieces and nephews. God can't like someone as selfish as I am." That is the spiritual darkness that casts its shadow over every soul in this world.

What caught my ear then as it does now is that she identified the source of the darkness in her life. To us, because of the sin into which we are born, selfishness comes naturally. In fact, the devil feeds the selfish instincts in us with an insidious lie that he whispers in every sinner's ear. The devil tells us that the key to happiness in life is simply a matter of getting our way. The more we get our way, the happier we will be. So powerful is this lie that people on earth even measure our days with this ruler. A good day is one in which we got our way. A bad day is one in which we failed to get what we want.

The problem is, this is a complete lie. We were not created by God to serve ourselves. God created us to serve him. That is the purpose of our lives. The more sin twists our heart to travel through each day driven by selfishness, the further we walk away from God and the deeper the darkness gets. We have all encountered signs revealing this lie in our lives. Have you noticed that when something does go our way in life and we feel happy about it, the happiness is temporary? It does not last. Selfish living can never produce lasting happiness. It only produces more sorrow and discontent. With every step we take on a road of serving ourselves, we are moving further into the darkness and further away from God. This is the darkness that casts its

shadow over every soul in this world. We travel a road of selfish living and there is no hope it will ever achieve the happiness we want.

What did Jesus say that changed this hopeless picture? Matthew tells us Jesus announced this simple phrase. ¹⁷ ***From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*** With this simple words Jesus announced hope for all who live in unhappiness and discontent, light for the darkness that fills our world. It is still possible to be welcomed into the presence of God. Jesus made that possible by doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. When we could not achieve anything but darkness and unhappiness on the road of selfishness that we built, Jesus came to this earth to build a new road for us to travel. Jesus came to earn God's favor for us. When trapped by selfishness we could not do God's will, Jesus came to live a perfect life in our place. He kept God's will for us. Then he took that life to the cross and endured the punishment we deserved before God. Paul announced the result of the light Jesus created. ***2 Cor. 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*** This is the news Jesus announces with his proclamation in our text, ***"The kingdom of heaven is near."***

This is the message through which Jesus has brought his light into our darkness. We were born with the same sinfulness, the same inclination toward selfishness, the same willingness to believe the devil's lie, as anyone else. But Jesus used the power of his message to show us his love for us when we did not deserve it. Through the power of the gospel he opened our eyes to the righteousness he won for us. He showed us the kingdom of heaven is not far away. It is not impossible to reach. It is ours simply by repenting and believing the gospel. By God grace this is the truth that fills our lives now through faith in Christ. Every day we in faith are confident of God's favor. We know that our purpose is to serve God and live to do his will, to speak words and follow actions that please him. We know that on this new path that Jesus built real joy and contentment can be ours each day. When in Christ we are sure of God's continued blessing and favor, happiness and contentment are our daily blessings.

That truth equips us to help others find this same joy. It is what I told the dying lady that day. When she said God would not be pleased with her and the selfish life she lived, I told her that was true. But that was not the whole story. It told her how Jesus saw her selfish heart and her dark actions, and he loved her anyhow. In fact, he loved her so much he came to this earth to earn God's favor for her. When God looked at her he saw Jesus' perfect life, not her selfish life. And as I talked, she continued to rock in that chair and mumble to herself, "This is wonderful. I never heard this before." When I came into that room that day, all she saw was darkness. When I left, she was sitting in light with a smile on her face.

This is the joy Jesus equips us to share each day. It is what he meant when he called his disciples that day in Galilee and told them, ***“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”*** He calls us here today to make us aware that we have that privilege every day in our lives. Think of the people you know who each day face discontent and unhappiness, a darkness that only grows for them because they think the way to be happy is to get their way. Believing the devil’s lie, each day they strive to get their way at all costs thinking it will make them happy. With each new step the darkness grows.

On the surface we might wonder what we can do about this. But fact is we have the light and sharing that light is the most natural thing. In a world where everyone cares about himself, you and I can share Jesus light with others by putting others ahead of ourselves. . This is what our pastors have been urging us to see over the past few months. Putting aside the practice of ushering us out, they urged us to learn to know one another better. Remember what Jesus said. ***John 13:35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*** This is a place where we can care about each other and support each other.

And as we leave the house of God today, the opportunities to share the light multiply in a world filled with darkness. Where everyone is working hard each day to get their way and to think of themselves, all we need to do is remember the freedom that is now ours in Christ. ***Phil.2:4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*** Jesus has set us free to care about others and to live to serve God by being a blessing to others. This is our joy each day. In a world filled with selfish people serving their needs and finding darkness with each step, we can spend our day caring about others and showing them that we care. In that way we can demonstrate that God cares and we can bring God’s blessing to their lives. The best day we can live on this earth is the day when someone goes to bed at night and thanks God that we crossed their path and made them feel valued. In that simple act we show light to people who face only darkness. We become living examples of a God who cared enough for them that he sent his only Son. We join the Lord in proclaiming “The kingdom of heaven is near.”