

Needing the Light: Homily for the Third Sunday of Epiphany. *Based on Isaiah 9: 1-4, 1 Cor1.10-18, Matt 4: 12-23.*

So, here we are, just past the middle of January. The excitement and joy of Christmas well and truly behind us, and the weather has been a real drag. The days are short and mostly grey. The political landscape in Ontario has been anything but cheerful, and the news from south of the border, well—let's not go there! Last Monday was 'Blue Monday', supposedly the most depressing day of the year. Are you feeling a bit low? Do you suffer from "SAD"? Seasonal Affective Disorder is a real thing, for some it's completely debilitating, a descent into despair and depression! Thanks be to God that I don't have SAD, but I find I have lower energy and mood this time of year. I don't think I could live in the far north, where there's no sun this time of year. I know I have mornings where I'd just as soon stay under the covers as get out of bed, its dark when I get up, still not full light when I leave, and by the time I'm home its twilight or even dark. And when I get home all I want to do is eat and sit by the wood stove covered up with a cozy blanket—it's like I'm in hibernation mode this time of year. Thank you for getting up in the dark to be here today! It's really no wonder so many people go south in the winter. So when I read Isaiah this week:

"And the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light and for those who sat in a land of deep darkness, on them a light has shined." (Is 9: 2) I thought how much we need the light, how much I missed the light! Now, admittedly, while the dark of the Canadian winter is by no means the shadow of death for most of us, who better than Canadians to understand the importance of light in the darkness, especially as we read this in January! Clearly this passage was not talking about the craving for light that we northern peoples feel at this time of year, but I do think making this analogy can help us to understand—maybe a little tiny bit anyway, the joy that Isaiah's message must have brought to the people of his time—people desperate for a spark of light in the severe darkness of their lives.

Today's OT scripture is from the time of early to mid eighth century BC and the writing of First Isaiah. This is the beginnings of the years of the instability and war that the divided nations of Israel & Judah were facing, leading to their eventual destruction and occupation by various warring factions. It is a time of tremendous fear; Assyrian invaders have attacked and taken over the northern kingdom of Israel, taking their lands to create Assyrian provinces. And then Assyria itself is being challenged by even more powerful nations. War and occupation damages and destroys everything: businesses disintegrate, trade is threatened, there is financial and political insecurity and food scarcities, loss of homes and farmland and to add to those traumas, it was also a time when outbreaks of plagues killed those who survived the wars.

And in the midst of this despair and darkness, where the shadow of death was a reality, the prophet's words come to the people of God: you who are living in this land deep darkness, on you light has shined. (vs 2-3) The prophet is telling them God has not forgotten them, God has seen them in their misery, knows what's going on, God is with them in the wretchedness that has become their lives, and God's light is piercing the darkness, God's light will prevail. The time of joy will come, the burden will be lifted; a message for the people of Isaiah's time that still speaks to us in our time. God sees our pain, understands our burdens and is with us in our darkness, our despair. There is a light at the end of the tunnel, and that light is God, the light that is always there with us, but in our darkness we don't always see it.

So now, we fast forward six and half centuries or so, to the time of Jesus—another time of oppression for God's people, under the Romans this time. John the Baptizer has done his job, so to speak, he has announced to the people the arrival of the Messiah, and during Jesus' baptism God affirmed that Jesus is the son of God in their midst. As part of the political and social darkness of this time, we find out that God's prophet John is jailed. Jesus hears of his incarceration, and it's like his cue, his time has come, his ministry is to begin. Matthew hearkens his readers back to the dismal times of Isaiah's prophecies, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, when "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned." (Matt 4.16)

Zebulun and Naphtali were the very first tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel deported by the Assyrians 700 years before Matthew wrote. It has been an extremely long time since that region was called the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. ... His point then? That Jesus — the son of David — is beginning his restoration of the Davidic kingdom (and his transformation of it into the kingdom of heaven) at ground zero where God’s covenant judgment had fallen seven centuries before.¹

Who is this ‘Great Light’ for Matthew? Jesus is the great light, God come to earth to illuminate, to show them the way to God’s kingdom.

Now, the plan is not for Jesus to be a one man band, apparently. He calls others to join him—in time, 12 altogether, symbolically representing one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. And what is Jesus calling these followers to? To join him in his ministry. He called them to leave their businesses, their families, to leave their comfort zones to a life of unknowns, a life following a travelling rabbi into, well, the indefinite and unfamiliar, as they instead fishing for people! And what do Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John do? They don’t say, well, I don’t think I can leave the family business, or I don’t have the time, or I’ve done enough for the synagogue already, it’s someone else’s turn or, I don’t think I can do that, I’m not the right person, I don’t have the skills necessary. No, they go “immediately” Matthew says, no hesitation, they recognize the call of the Lord and go. Jesus called them follow his lead, to learn from him, to bring people to know God’s light, God’s love. This is a call to evangelism, bringing people to come to know the light, the love of God into the darkness of their lives. It is what all Christians are called to do, what Jesus did, what he taught his disciples to do. “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” (Matt 4. 23)

We lose sight of this calling; we lose sight of the fact that this is what church is really for, what it is all about! We get caught up in the dollars and cents of keeping bills paid, or disagreements in how to do things, or who should do it, or shouldn’t and we get caught up in the challenges of dealing with so many different personalities. This isn’t new! Where there are people, there are politics. Our reading from first Corinthians is a great example of church politics getting in the way of the message. Even first century Christians were having trouble being Church. Paul says: “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no division among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” (1Co 1.10)

We need to be reminded of that, being united in our purpose, to be the hands and feet of Jesus, to bring the light and love of Jesus to those who don’t know. It is our call, it is the purpose of being Church. This time before our annual Vestry meeting, in this time of our own uncertainty of the direction our parish is going, I urge to consider what your call is. What is your role as members of Christ’s holy church in this church, at this time? Jesus didn’t abandon his disciples to trod out on their own, he was with them, even when he died he sent his Holy Spirit. That’s something we forget, If God calls you to it, God will see you through it. Jesus lights the way.

Seldom is the call to work for God’s kingdom as blatant as today’s gospel story – Jesus walking up to you and saying “Follow-me”. But however the call to be a part of God’s kingdom comes to you, it often requires giving up something we’re not sure we want to give, be that our time, our talent or our resources in some way. Commitment is required. And sometimes it even creates challenges in our present relationships that will need working out.

I’ll end with a quote from Mitch Albom’s book “have a little faith.” It’s a book, a true story we’re studying right now (at St. James.) Mitch is asked by the aging rabbi of his childhood synagogue to do his eulogy. Mitch is unsure he wants to, is

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markshea/2014/01/land-of-zebulun-land-of-naphtali-galilee-of-the-gentiles.html> accessed January 18.17

really not comfortable with the whole idea of it, unsure he is even qualified. He gives it deep thought and comes to a realization—and here's the quote: “...(A)s is often with the case of faith, I thought I was being asked a favor, when in fact I was being given one.”²

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² Mitch Albom: have a little faith (Hyperion: New York) 1989 page 2