

A Light Has Dawned

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Old Testament reading, **“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a light has dawned.”** Here ends our text.

It was a good land. The people there lived in prosperity. In their former country they’d suffered in poverty and were persecuted for their way of worship. But God brought them into this new land, a land of bounty and plenty, to be their very own. They multiplied and prospered in this land. God blessed them. They worshipped God according to his Word. They taught their children his Word. They trusted God’s promises and obeyed his laws.

But then the people sinned. They forgot God’s Word. They began to follow the customs and religious practices of the other nations around them. They no longer followed God’s commandments but did wicked things. They followed the desires of their own flesh. They indulged in sexual sins and the occult. They killed their own infant sons and daughters for their own benefit. From their prosperity, they fashioned other gods. One after another their leaders were immoral and self-serving, and their government was corrupt. Though the Lord sent many preachers who warned them to turn from their evil ways, they didn’t repent. They provoked the Lord to anger, and his wrath burned against them.

So the Lord raised up the king of Assyria who invaded the land of Israel, the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun in the region of Galilee. This king carried many of the Israelites captive to Assyria. Then he brought people from foreign nations, Gentiles, into the land. They brought their gods with them. They didn’t fear the Lord or know his ways. The promises and statutes of the Lord were forgotten. The people continued in their former evil ways. The Lord held them in contempt. They were a people living in darkness, dwelling in a land of deep darkness.

The prophet Isaiah saw these things take place during his lifetime. He saw God’s judgment on the lands of Naphtali and Zebulun around the Sea of Galilee. He saw these people dwelling in darkness. But he also saw ahead to a time when a light would dawn. **“In the former time [God] brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a light has dawned.”** But just what was this light?

Nearly 700 years after the time of Isaiah, a small family returned to live in Nazareth, a little town in what was once the land of Zebulun. The boy grew up there, became a man, and worked with his father as a carpenter. His name was Jesus. At about age 30, he left home and headed south to Judea where he was anointed by the Holy Spirit to begin his ministry. But he returned and lived in Capernaum, a city on the Sea of Galilee in the former land of Naphtali. Jesus began to preach. Once again the Word of God was preached in this land of darkness. He preached to a people living in darkness. He preached God’s commands and God’s promises. He preached the Law, and he preached the Gospel. He said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” The people living in darkness saw a great light. They saw and heard the Son of God.

Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee. He saw some sweaty fishermen, working at their nets. He said, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Follow me, and you will preach the Word of God to these people in darkness. Jesus called them from their vocation as fishermen to a vocation of preaching. The sun was rising on a dark land.

Jesus went throughout all the region of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom. He healed every disease and affliction among the people. Those oppressed by demons, those who were epileptics, those who were paralyzed. He healed them all. His fame spread and great crowds followed him. On them, a light had dawned.

As Isaiah had prophesied, the people rejoiced in this light. They rejoiced like farmers, who after enduring frost, draught, and insects, finally had a good harvest in the barn. They were glad like soldiers, who after a weary battle, sat down to divide up the spoils. They were a people who were overjoyed because their oppression was over. It was like in the days of the Judges when the people of Israel were holed up in caves while the Midianites devoured their harvest fields like locusts. But God raised up a deliverer, Gideon, who with his few men uncovered their torches, blew their trumpets, and cried out “a sword for the Lord!” They rallied their countrymen and drove those vermin Midianites out of their land. Then they returned to divide the spoils and enjoy their harvest fields. The rod of their oppressor was broken, and they rejoiced.

After centuries of living in darkness, once again the Word of God was preached in Galilee, in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. The Word of God made flesh was among them. God himself was among them, Jesus Christ. The people who dwelt in darkness, even those displaced Gentiles, saw a great light. On them, a light had dawned.

Many of our ancestors came to this country in hopes of leaving poverty and religious persecution behind. They came to a good land. And I must say that God blessed them. They multiplied and prospered in this land. They

Third Sunday after Epiphany - January 22, 2023

worshipped God according to his Word, and taught their children his Word. They trusted God's promises and obeyed his laws.

But is that true today? Or are we now a people living in darkness? It seems we have forgotten God's Word. Though we have a Bible in almost every household, we don't read it. We don't read it to our own children. Instead, we read cosmetics magazines and the sports page. We watch sit-coms that degrade marriage and the family. We stand in line at theatres to be thrilled by violence and sex. Instead of going to church to worship God, we go to the stadium to worship our sports gladiators. We deny God's Word but deny our flesh nothing: liquor, narcotics, pornography. We indulge in sex outside of marriage. Homosexuality is prevalent and accepted. The occult is on the rise. We abort millions of our babies for our own convenience and call it our right. From the prosperity God has given us, we don't give back to him, but instead we tithe regularly to the cable company, e-bay, and the mall. Our political leaders tell us they want to improve our life, and yet many have no respect for the sanctity of life, the unborn or the aged. Instead of teaching our children that they were created in the image of God, we now teach them that they evolved from apes, and they begin to act accordingly. Many immigrants come to our country. Some bring their false gods with them. But they're not the problem. It is us, the people of God, who have forgotten his laws and his promises.

Do you not think that we have provoked the Lord to anger? Does his wrath not burn against our nation? Whom will God raise up to carry out his judgment against us? What kind of terror awaits us, a people living in darkness? But all is not lost.

When Jesus died on the cross, God's anger and wrath were poured out on him. God carried out his judgment for our sins on Jesus. Jesus died for a world living in darkness. But on Easter Sunday, at the first light of dawn, the women heard the message from the angels that Jesus had risen from the dead. God accepted Christ's sacrifice for our sins. His judgment was satisfied. God had not raised up a foreign king to punish his wayward people, but God had raised up his own Son, the king of kings, to bless all people, even those Gentiles, even us. So the women returned with great joy and told the disciples.

Forty days later, Jesus ascended to heaven. But even then, Jesus continued to preach. He preached through those same disciples he left here on earth - those same men that he called *from* the vocations of fisherman and tax collector - those same men that he called *to* a vocation of preaching. They preached the Word of God. They preached the Law and the Gospel. They said, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." But they didn't just preach to a people living in darkness in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, an area about the size of Vanderburgh County. Jesus commanded them, "Go and make disciples of *all* nations, baptizing and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. For I am with you always, to the end of the age." They were his witnesses from Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth. It was like the sunrise after a night of darkness. The whole earth was bathed in the light of the Gospel, the good news that all men who dwelt in darkness are saved through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. This light dawned on the pagan Greeks and Romans, Arabs and Asians, even on those barbaric Germans and savage Norsemen. The people dwelling in darkness saw a great light. And the world was changed.

This country of ours may be in deep darkness. Many people here do dwell in darkness. But remember, Jesus Christ is still preaching. He's not just preaching along the shores of Galilee, in the towns of Nazareth and Capernaum, but also along the shores of the Ohio River and in the towns of Evansville and Darmstadt. He's preaching through men whom he's called into the vocation of the holy ministry. And their message is the same, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." Turn from your sins and turn to God that he might reign in your heart through Christ Jesus. And wherever Jesus preaches, people in darkness see a great light.

And we rejoice in this light. We rejoice like laborers who after a long week of work finally receive their paychecks. We're filled with joy like a poor young couple who just inherited their great Aunt's dining room set. We're glad like the people in Paris who cheered the Allied tanks parading down their streets. The tyrant's occupation of their land was over, and they were free. Sometimes it seems like we're holed up inside our homes and churches as sin and evil devour our land. But God has raised up a deliverer, Jesus Christ. His preachers uncover the torches of the Gospel, blow their trumpets of victory, and cry out "the Lord is risen!" They rally the church of God. Through God's Word and Sacraments they drive that vermin devil, the ways of the world, and their sinful flesh out of their life. They return to God and rejoice over the spoils and harvest: forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and more Gentiles brought into God's kingdom.

Wherever the Gospel is preached, people living in darkness see a great light. They see a great light because Jesus Christ is preaching. As he promised, the Word of God made flesh is with us always. On us, a people once living in darkness, a light has dawned. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.