

Matthew 4:12-25 – Epiphany 3 – Light has Dawned – January 22, 2023

+In Nomine Iesu+

One of my favorite Bible verses is Psalm 119:105. I make our confirmands learn this one by heart—or I try to, at least. And it is probably one you know, even if you don't know the reference. Here the Psalmist declares, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

There are two things worth noticing here. We want to think of God's Word—the Scriptures as a lamp—as light. His Word brings the light of truth to us. His Word is truth. We can disagree with God's Word all we like. But if we do, the Word is still right, and we are just wrong.

But in addition, the light also points us to a particular path. He shows us the way that we should go. And that way is in the footsteps of Christ. His life is at the center of the Scriptures. The way is the way of discipleship—as we become followers of Jesus. And the way leads ultimately to eternal life—the only way to eternal life.

So, with this verse in mind, Matthew pictures the coming of Jesus on the scene in Galilee as the coming of light. And for Matthew, light is full of prophetic implications. He quotes Isaiah. "The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light." And if you read this passage in its context, we have another mention of the name Immanuel—God with us. The light includes God's presence with us humans.

So, Jesus' coming is like a sunrise after a long cold night. The darkness slinks away. The warmth brings a new day. And we can finally see the way things are—and the way things ought to be. His coming is an Epiphany for all with eyes to see—for all who will stand in His light. As you will notice, I have tried to choose hymns today that reflect that reality. "O Christ, our true and only light, enlighten those who sit in night."

Jesus begins His public ministry in our Gospel reading. Chronologically, this follows Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. We will deal with that passage at the beginning of Lent. Our reading also reaches forward right to the edge of the Sermon on the Mount. We will start with the Beatitudes next week.

Jesus' ministry begins with John the Baptist's arrest. John had had criticized Herod. He had called him to repentance. And Herod throws him in prison—all for merely suggesting that Herod might have sinned. And that little detail demonstrates just how dark the world had become.

But darkness can never stop the light. And Jesus' preaching picks up right where John's had left off. The words are identical from John and Jesus, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." John proclaimed this message as one who had come to prepare the way. Jesus picks up John's words bringing God's end-time salvation—now present in His public ministry. And there are three things worth noting about this proclamation.

It begins with repentance. Jesus sees His hearers as the lost sheep of Israel. They think of themselves as God's people. And yet, He knows the truth. They have wandered from the faith—into error—into unbelief—into the ways of the world—into darkness. Sometimes it is

hard to tell just how dark things are. And now, these people stand under God's judgment as those who are condemned.

The message of repentance needs to be rightly understood. It suggests a change of mind. It is to embrace a different way of thinking—of seeing the world. But in a sense, it is also passive. It means something like “be converted.” This is probably not a message they thought they needed. And yet, here it is—flowing from Jesus' own lips. Maybe they tolerated it with John. He was something of a radical. He said shocking things. But now, Jesus is saying that John is right. The mission is to the lost sheep—sheep who don't even think they are lost.

Now, there were those who were faithful—a remnant still loyal to the God of Israel. But the general spiritual condition was one of lostness—and a lack of awareness of their situation. The call for repentance then is a call to conversion—to faith—to move away from sin and unbelief and indifference—to find new life—a new way of living—to trust in Jesus Christ as He comes on the scene.

Second, Jesus grounds the call for repentance in the declaration that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Maybe we let these words wash right over us. But don't. Let the implications of what Jesus is saying sink in.

Jesus is saying that the kingly rule and reign of God—things we expect on the Last Day—were beginning right then and there with Jesus. The kingdom of heaven—as Jesus says in Matthew—is the kingdom of God. In Mark, the Gospel begins with this summary, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

And so, we quickly discover that the kingdom of heaven is not a place. We shouldn't think about pearly gates or puffy clouds. And it is not even a group of people or an organization. In reality, it is a Person. The kingdom of heaven is the rule and reign of God. It is what God the King is now doing in Jesus in human history.

But there is also this strange tension between Jesus and the kingdom of God. It's like the sun is just creeping over the horizon. But we still have to wait a while for the light—and all of its benefits—to be fully realized. There is this *already* and *not yet* quality to the kingdom. Jesus, the Son of God, is there beginning His mission of salvation. And that salvation will avail on the Last Day. There are both present and future implications for kingdom of heaven.

And third, there is a call to follow. And this call has a sense of urgency and immediacy for those who first hear His words. In this passage—with the nearness of the kingdom so clearly evident—Jesus calls His first disciples. Andrew, Peter, James, and John. These verses offer the first example of Jesus' call to a life of discipleship. And they function as a standard for discipleship.

It is an interesting reaction to Jesus' preaching and call. Matthew doesn't note any miracles from Jesus up to this call to follow. The miracles come after. Of course, we don't want to forget about Jesus' Baptism back in chapter three—with the voice of the Father and the visible presence of the Spirit. We know that Andrew was one of the disciples of John the Baptist. So maybe he witnesses such things. Last weekend we noted Andrew bringing his

brother to Jesus. And, I suppose, we want an explanation for why they follow Jesus in the way that they do.

But Matthew wants us to focus on the call—on Jesus' words, "Follow me." The text is not interested in a psychological explanation for their decision. This isn't a rational moment where the disciples had to choose between a life of literal fishing and a life of evangelistic fishing.

And really, there is only one good reason for them to drip their nets—to leave their careers and families—and follow. The only good reason for the proximity of the call and their obedient response is Jesus Christ Himself. It is He who calls. Jesus is why these fishermen follow.

Matthew will have a moment like these disciples himself. He doesn't mention it in his own Gospel, but Mark does. Matthew is called Levi in this context. Mark reports, "And as Jesus passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him."

All of this is quite extraordinary. And it shows us something about Jesus' Word. This encounter shows us Jesus' unconditional—immediate—and mysterious authority. Nothing precedes it. Nothing follows. Nothing but the obedience of these disciples Jesus called. Because Jesus is the Christ, He has authority to call. He can demand obedience. He can make disciples. He opens the eyes of His called ones—and they can see by His light.

And those who follow Him leave everything. Not to find their best possible life—or best possible self. Instead, they follow because of the call itself. Former things are left behind—ways of thinking—ways of living. They are sacrificed. The disciples leave behind the security of everyday life. They leave behind the foreseeable future and embrace life with Christ.

And so, this call to discipleship is a commitment solely to Jesus Christ, come what may. It is a break from the lifestyles of the world through His gracious call. But because Christ exists—because He walks on our planet—it is the only decision that makes any sense.

Things used to be different for these disciples. They could live peacefully doing their own thing—at least as much as the Romans would allow. They could pursue their work with very little opposition—except maybe from the fish. And of course, all the while they waited quietly for their Messiah to come.

But now, they could no longer keep quiet. They could no longer pursue lives of their own choosing. Jesus had called them to follow Him. The light had come. And this call dissolved all other ways of viewing the world—all other commitments. Imitation—following in His steps—heeding His call—is the decisive situation whereby the situation for being a disciple exists.

So, what do we do with all of this? I think the right response is simply to follow Jesus too. Leave the world behind. Leave behind your sin. Become a disciple. Let Jesus' coming be a decisive moment for you.

The light of Christ calls us to repentance—a change of mind—a conversion to a new way of thinking—a new way of living. And this call reminds us that the Kingdom of heaven is among us in Jesus Christ. He has come into our world. And His mission has begun.

And finally, the light of Christ shows us the way we should go—following Jesus in discipleship. And it is the only wise decision. Christ calls. And we must follow. If we truly understand what is going on, what else could we possibly do?

The goal of my sermon today is to get us thinking about ourselves as Jesus' disciples. We come to Him and learn from Him. We imitate Him. We let His words give us light and life. I want you to think of Jesus this morning as if He is walking by and calling you to follow Him.

And this means every other demand that the world places on us becomes secondary. Some of them we will just need to ignore completely. The disciples are no longer fisher men—they are fishers of men. And the change in us is very much the same. We follow Christ as He brings the kingdom of heaven. And the way will look a lot like the Sermon on the Mount. We will spend our time there through most of the rest of Epiphany.

Christ comes to us. The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light. Christ calls us. And His Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. May we respond like Andrew and Peter, James and John. May we heed His call—leaving everything behind—and follow Him. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+