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the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
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.”*

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

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. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

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. So, his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. Matthew 4:12-25

Before we walk together through the words of our text from God’s Word today, I would like to take a few moments to give you some insight into the context the apostle Matthew was using when he wrote this account of Jesus’ life. Our text for today begins right after Jesus had succeeded in fending off the devil’s temptations to draw Jesus’ away from the purpose for which God has sent him. This event had been preceded by Jesus’s baptism by John the Baptist, which revealed that Jesus was the fulfillment of promise of God to send a savior into the world to save His people from their sins. Now in our text for today Matthew records the next three events of Jesus’ life as he begins to live out God’s call and purpose for his life. – and in these three events there is one common theme points to the purpose for which God sent Jesus into the world and the purpose of why we are here together in this church today.

The common theme is “Galilee.” The word “Galilee” is repeated in our text five times. “Galilee” is a region in northern Israel - and it would have been a very strange place for the long-promised Savior, the Messiah of God for the Jewish nation, to appear - as the region of Galilee was bordered on the north by Syria, on the south by Samaria, on the west by Phoenicia, and on the east by the Decapolis, which were ten independent cities where Greek culture prevailed. Galilee was surrounded by Gentiles.

Yet out of all the regions in the promised-land of the Jews, God sent His Son Jesus to the outback of Galilee rather than 70 miles south to Jerusalem, the city of God’s people. But Galilee was not just geographically far from Jerusalem; it was considered spiritually and politically far away, too. Galilee was the most pagan of the Jewish provinces and Galileans were considered by Judeans to sit rather loosely to the law and to be less biblically pure than those in or near Jerusalem. Galilee was also notorious for being the nest of revolution and the haunt of Zealot revolutionary movements. Just a few years before Jesus’ birth, Sephoris, capital city of Galilee, had been led in revolt by Judas of Galilee against the Roman government and had brought Galilee into defeat and many of the people of God into shame. So, Galileans were looked upon with contempt. Even Nathanael, one of Jesus’ disciples, had his doubts about Galileans. In John 1:46 he asked: “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*”

The Galilean people were a pagan mixed population who were deeply despised by the somewhat arrogant religious people of Judea and Jerusalem. But Isaiah prophesied that *they* would be the ones who would see the great light of God, Immanuel, the virgin-born Son, who would rescue them from the deadly effects of sin, bringing them to God so they might know the fullness of hope and joy in Jesus. This is why our Lord went first to Nazareth in the region of Galilee, the territory traditionally known as Zebulun, and then to Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, in the territory traditionally known as Naphtali. By going to Galilee, Jesus was going not to the favored, not to the wise, not to the influential, not to the successful, not to those who were of noble birth, but to the common, ordinary, desperate, needy people of the world – people like you and I, like us. This is how God works. This is how God has always worked. He chooses the common people, the lowly people, the broken people, the struggling people, the suffering people, the foolish people, the people who have no standing in the world, to give him the greatest glory as He shines his great light of life on them. He does so because the so-called stars of the world don't see their need for the great light of God. In their eyes, they don't see how desperately hungry and thirsty they are for God.

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— 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." From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Matthew 4:12-17

Jesus emerges out of the darkness of being severely and aggressively tempted by the devil in the desert to step away from God's call in his life – only to once again step into another darkness by finding out that John the Baptist had been arrested by King Herod for publicly condemning the king of having an affair and then marrying the wife of Herod's half-brother Philip. Eventually John the Baptist would be executed. Such is opposition from his fellow Jews that would be the pattern Jesus would continue to experience the rest of his life. His proclamation that he had been anointed of God to rescue them from spiritual poverty, captivity, and blindness was not well received by those who considered themselves to be God's special people. In Jesus' day, the Jews were expecting a Messiah from God who would bring imminent judgment on their enemies and restore the nation of Israel back to its original glory. Yet Jesus had another agenda. In defining the qualifications for restoration and blessing in terms of *personal repentance rather than worldly reign* they suddenly understood, and were offended that he was challenging everyone, even God's people, to come out of the darkness of their sinful self-righteousness.

One could understand how the Jews, the chosen people of God, would have missed out on the light of Christ. They were living in the midst of a time of great struggle. They were tired of all the bad news. For years, they had been living under severe Roman oppression. The desire for independence and freedom was deep and strong. This is the same air we breathe as we live in times of terrorism, war, financial uncertainty, deep political division and moral decline, the ache of our hearts is that we would be independent and free from the tyranny of such oppression. In Jesus' day, they were also living under spiritual leaders who were either compromising their beliefs to get along with Rome or who were so religiously strict that their joy in God was nonexistent. This also sounds so much like the state of the church in the days that we live in. But Jesus came to offer something better. *He came to offer himself.* He came to offer the light of God for those who are in bondage to the darkness of their sin. We saw that live giving light of God begin to shine last week last week in Matthew 4:1-11. Having defeated the evil one by the power of Holy Spirit and by the sword of the Word of God, Jesus came to be our light of life: *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (John 8:12). Because John 1:4 tells us that *"in him was life, and the life was the light of men"* Jesus could then say: *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). Jesus is the Great Light of God who gives light of God's life.

How can we come to know the Light of God who gives the light of God's life? Jesus said: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" The word "*repent*" here in the Greek literally means "to change one's mind or purpose." Theologically it means to turn around, or more specifically to turn away from going your own way and turn towards God. You would think that the idea of repentance would be a joyful one, since turning away from the constant frustration we all experience when head off into our own direction, and so heading back in God's direction should would bring us to the place where we will fully know the grace and joy and glory we were created for. Yet we rarely see repentance as a joy!

The hard part about repentance *is admitting that we are desperately weak and need help.* This is why the Jews of Jesus' day were so aggressively opposed to him. In calling them to repentance, he was challenging their prideful attitude regarding our spiritual condition. It was okay to call the Gentiles to repent, but Jesus crossed the line when he called the Jews to repent. They had a higher opinion of themselves than Jesus did, and as a result of their resistance, our Lord sought to save Gentiles like us, calling us away from following the path of our self-centeredness and head back towards the mercy, grace, love and joy of God. Sadly, many Jews, Gentiles and Christians just won't make that change.

John 3:19 tells us: "*This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.*" While the Bible called Galilee a place of great darkness, few who live there would agree with that. I've been to Galilee and spent time in Nazareth, Capernaum, and Tiberius. The Galilee region is one of the most beautiful areas in all of Palestine – a magnificent lake, flowing rivers, rolling hillsides, with abundant plants and vegetation. The buildings and palaces and stadiums of Tiberius are reflective of a great thriving city rather than the dark culture of immoral corruption. Yet we know in fact that the region of Galilee was saturated with the darkness of anti-God influence in the ways that they lived their lives and how viewed each other and the world. And the Jews did little to transform that culture, but instead sought simply to oppose it.

This is also the challenge of our day. Just as our eyes naturally adjust from light to darkness, so to do the eyes of our hearts easily adjust to the spiritual, moral, ethical, and emotional darkness. A story is told of a blind man who was found sitting at the corner of a street at night in a great city with a fully lighted lantern next to him. Someone went up to him and asked him what he needed a lantern for, since he was blind, and couldn't see even in the daylight. The blind man replied: "I have the lantern here so that no one will stumble over me." Too often that is the excuse that many who claim Christ use when confronted with the darkness of sin in the culture and the darkness of sin in their own lives. Our only defense is to keep our eyes and hearts focused on the great light of Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior of the world. "*The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" John 1:4-5 tells us that in Jesus we will know true life, and that Jesus' life is the great light of God, "*and that light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" Amen!

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. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Matthew 4:18-22

The fulfillment of the promise of God to send a Savior into the world began in "*Galilee*" revealed the heart of God to reach those who know they are desperately need God in their hearts and lives. Matthew speaks of that again to us here in the that first four disciples who responded to Jesus call to follow him were all from "*Galilee.*" Jesus chose Peter and Andrew, who were considered to be lowly fishermen, as well as James and John, to become *fishers of men.* Soon he would choose eight others, including Matthew (who was from Capernaum in Galilee). Jesus called all twelve of his disciples to follow him so that he would send them out into the dark world to share the great light of the gospel.

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” The call of Christ to be a *“fisher of men”* is not a call to more activity or to self-effort or to duty. Rather, Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John into an ever-deepening relationship with him by following him. No matter who we are or what we do or where we are in life, Jesus Christ does not call us to a place or a position – *he calls us to himself*. Just look at who he ultimately called. Jesus called common people - fishermen, tax collectors, and rebels - to develop a deep relationship with him, so that he might change the world through those whom he calls.

It is significant that Jesus called *fishermen* to be *“fishers of men.”* Most of us think of fishing as a form of recreation, but fishing for a living is hard work. Fishermen know what it’s like to be patient. They study the weather, the patterns of the fish and try out different techniques of casting. They work hard, long hours because they love fishing. But Jesus called these fisherman to something greater than what they loved to do: *Jesus called them to love him*. He was calling them into a relationship that would alter the way they looked at fish and the way they would look at themselves and others. Jesus called them to take their passion, their gifting and their skills and apply them in a different direction, one that would make an eternal difference. They would still be fishermen at heart but Jesus changed the focus of their lives from earthly passions to a kingdom passions to live for Him in joyful obedience.

When Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow Him - they obeyed without question - and the transformation of their lives in Christ began. They would be transformed from self-centered, rough-around-the-edges fishermen, to fully committed fishers-of-men who became partners with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords for the eternal work of the Kingdom. The call of Christ is the same today. When we do follow, he transforms our hearts so that we might become fishers of men in the very place we are right now. God moves upon our lives, placing us in strategic locations and settings so that we might, as followers of Christ, become the bait that attracts people to Jesus. A Kingdom of God perspective lifts our thinking beyond our temporal process of work and school and play, to the place of providential calling – where we can be eternally changed and engage others and point them to Jesus.

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. So, his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. Matthew 4:23-25

The fulfillment of the promise of God to send a Savior into the world began in *“Galilee”* revealed the heart of God to reach those who knew they desperately need God. Matthew first revealed that to us in the that first four disciples who responded to Jesus call to follow him were all from *“Galilee”* – and now Matthew again affirms that in that Jesus carried out his initial ministry *“throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.”* This Jesus’ threefold ministry on earth is God’s blueprint for the holistic ministry of the church on earth: *teaching* for the mind, *preaching* for the heart, *healing* for the body.

“Teaching in their synagogues.” Jesus taught the Word of God to the people of God. The truth is, Israel was a nation of religious people, yet they were grossly ignorant of the ways of God. If merely judged by synagogue attendance attended each week, one would think they were deeply spiritual. But the synagogue served as the central focal point of community life – and what they did there was more about themselves than it was of God. The people of Jesus’ day were steeped in tradition, superstition, and confusion, and so step by step, Jesus taught them the truth of God. Jesus disciples continued this practice after his resurrection. We must never minimize the necessity of teaching God’s Word. It is foundational to our faith. We face this danger today, as we try to see the call of Christ for the church through the cultural fog of our self, comfort and entitlement. It would be so easy for the church to become a repository of friendly, religious activity rather than a house of God - where we might be eternally changed as we plunge into the depths of learning, knowing and living out who God truly is.

“Proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.” Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom to the people of God. The word *“gospel”* here refers to good news of what God in Christ in his death on the cross done on behalf of us sinners so that we might be brought back into a right relationship with God. The *“gospel of the kingdom”* was at the heart of all that Jesus said and did. The call of Jesus Christ in preaching *“the gospel of the kingdom”* was an invitation to become a member of the kingdom, to live in radical submission to Jesus and his kingship and his lordship over their lives. Every time we hear a true preaching of the *“gospel of the kingdom”* we are being called to make a decision *between self or God*. It is impossible to be neutral to that message, because the gospel either penetrates our hearts and minds, and gives light and life through faith in Jesus Christ – or it is ignored, rejected, argued against, explained away, or excused. Jesus preached the good news of joyful surrender and submission to God.

“Healing every disease and every affliction among the people.” Jesus healed every disease and every affliction among God’s people. In this ministry, our Lord demonstrated his ultimate conquering power over sin in its broadest effects. But sickness is just a symptom of the greater evil of the wickedness within the hearts of all humanity and the ministry of physical healing addresses only the temporal effects of sin. While we are to address the physical effects of sin, we must not ignore the reality that we also need healing in regard to ignorance, suffering, anxiety, depression, addictions, anger, fear, oppression, bitterness, habitual enslavements, and countless other effects of sin. All these things have their roots in the original fall, that one act with countless consequences that brought death into the world, and the quiet but desperate reality that all sin separates us all from God. But Jesus is the Great Physician. The greatest healing we will ever know is that which we find at the cross of Jesus Christ. It is at the cross where not only the desperate depravity of our sin is *revealed*; but also where the desperate depravity of our sin is *healed*. It is at the cross where we truly and eternally find the healing that our hearts and our souls so desperately need and desire.

A pastor was once asked to give a brief statement at a local meeting of a Rotary club about what he did for a living at his church. He said this: "I'm with a global enterprise. We have branches in every country in the world. We have our representatives in nearly every parliament and board room on earth. We're into motivation and behavior alteration. We run hospitals, feeding stations, crisis pregnancy centers, universities, publishing houses, and nursing homes. We care for our clients from birth to death. We are into life insurance and fire insurance. We perform spiritual heart transplants. Our original organizer owns all the real estate on earth plus an assortment of galaxies and constellations. He knows everything and lives everywhere. Our product is free for the asking and it's not for sale. Our CEO was born in a hick town, worked as a carpenter, didn't own a home, was misunderstood by his family, hated by enemies, walked on water, was condemned to death without a trial, and arose from the dead—and I talk with him *everyday*." Brothers and sisters - that is our business! We are the fallen, desperate people of the despised, lowly Galilee, who have dwelt in the darkness of the shadow of death. But God has fulfilled His promise! The great light of Jesus Christ has dawned upon us! He has died in our place on a cross and he has risen from the dead. We are forgiven and restored back to God. And Jesus has risen from the dead and he is calling us to follow him, so we might be also fishers of men for the kingdom of God by sharing the love of Christ with those around us – and also as a church, teaching for the mind, preaching for the heart, and healing for the body. Amen.

2017-06-04

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