

3rd Sun. after Epiphany
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The Only Light for your Path

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Isaiah 8:19-9:2

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I'd like to start today's sermon by transporting you through time and space to Palestine. The year is about 720BC. The specific place in Palestine is the Northern Kingdom of Israel. After King Solomon's death, the United Kingdom of Israel was divided into two kingdoms when Solomon's descendants struggled for power. Two tribes. The specific place in the Northern Kingdom to which I am taking you is the land of Zebulon and Naphtali. After King Solomon's death there was a power grab, and Israel was permanently divided. Of the 12 tribes, two lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. 10 lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. So we're focusing on the land occupied by two of those 10 tribes: Zebulon and Naphtali. They lived in the area just to the north and west of Sea of Galilee... the area that in Jesus' time was called Galilee.

So imagine you are there in 720 BC. You feel you're living in a dark haze. Your homeland is repeatedly raided and invaded. You see you have the misfortune of living in the invasion corridor. Israel is made up of fairly rough terrain. If you are in invading army, you come from the north. And you go through the area that is easiest to travel through... the land of Zebulon and Naphtali... Galilee. Each time the foreign armies invade, there is significant loss of life and possessions. No sooner do you rebuild your life and start to feel settled when the armies come through again, killing and plundering. What a horrible existence! Where do you turn for help and guidance? Where can you find answers and hope?

Your friends and neighbors believe a variety of things. In fact, there is quite some diversity of culture in the area. Some conquering armies of the past have transplanted foreigners to the area. They've become your neighbors. There's been some intermarrying going on. There are also purely Jewish people in the area. Not only is there a racial mix, but there's a religious mix as well. Some believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the one true God... but not very many. Most worship many gods, but especially one name Baal. And most seem to mix it all together. They take religious beliefs from different places – the beliefs that they like... the ones that seem right to them – and that's what they live by. What about you? Where do you turn for help and guidance? Where can you find answers and hope in these dark times?

You're not the only one asking the question. Everyone seems lost. All are seeking. With the physical suffering and loss of life... and with all sorts of ideas about God floating around, no one seems to know what's true anymore. You notice how it has becoming increasingly popular to go to mediums and spiritists. These people claim to be in touch with the dead. They seem to have insight into the future. Many people swear they've been helped. Could this be the light for your path you so desperately need? If only there was real truth: a solid foundation upon which to build your life and your eternal future!

Friends, this situation is what was described in the O.T. lesson we heard earlier in Isaiah 8:19 – 9:2. Doesn't their situation sound strikingly similar to what we see around us in the year 2011 here in Midtown Omaha? All around us, people are living in a dark haze. While we're blessed not to have to deal with foreign raids and invaders, we do have to deal with thieves and murderers. We do have to deal with financial struggles. We do have the problem of difficult

relationships and unloving neighbors. ! Where do you turn for help and guidance? Where can you find answers and hope?

Like those people living in the land of Zebulon and Naphtali, we live in an area of amazing racial diversity. Within 5 miles of our church, we can find people of Hispanic descent, African descent... not to mention Irish, Germans, Asians and many more. There's also quite a religious mix as well. Some are Christians, others Muslims, some Buddhist. Many don't actively believe in God at all. Most people seem to pull together whatever they can from whatever source they find to give meaning and purpose to their lives. They seek light for their path by pulling whatever sounds good to them from whatever religion or philosophy they hear about.

Now... what about you? Where do you turn for help and guidance? Where can you find answers and hope in these dark times? Right now we're sitting in church, so you know what the right answer is, don't you? We turn to God and his Word. But is that where you go in your every day life? When you feel you're in the dark, do you find you look other places?

- Even in our day, more people than we realize turn to **fortune tellers and psychics**. Have you been tempted to check them out and see what they say? Have you ever let a horoscope guide your decisions? Do you realize this is dabbling in witchcraft? Do you understand that you're saying to God, "I doubt you're really in control of today or my future, so I'm looking to dark sources for answers." This is very dangerous territory to play in!
- More commonly, people turn to **paid counselors** for answers. Now understand me right... I think there are situations and circumstances when a counselor is most definitely needed. But how many times when people have deep questions that have spiritual roots, they turn to a secular counselor for answers? When guilt is at the root of our problem, can a secular counselor guide us to true freedom and forgiveness? They won't be talking about Jesus.
- How many turn to **self-help books and articles**? Again, they can be useful in some cases. We can learn some skills and techniques that help us in our service to God. But in the absence of God's truth and his light, they fall short and turn us inward for answers when the truth is outside of us, not inside of us.

Friends, when you feel you are in the dark and you need help and guidance... when you need answers and hope... can I suggest to you a better place... a perfect place... to find it? Let's get back to our Bible text for today. There is the answer. God, through the prophet Isaiah, had good news for the people living in darkness in the land of Zebulon and Naphtali. And he has that same good news for you here today. Listen:

2 When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

Serious consequences for seeking answers in the wrong places, wouldn't you say? But the text goes on:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulon and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan— The people

walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. The hope, deliverance and guidance they so desperately needed came to them! Because you see, in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, that is, Galilee, Jesus conducted a major portion of his ministry. Nazareth, the place Jesus grew up, is in Galilee. Capernaum, Jesus' headquarters when he preached in the north part of Israel, is in Galilee. These people walking in darkness saw the great light of God's deliverance in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel writer Matthew saw this for what it was: a direct fulfillment of the prophecy Isaiah made to these troubled people over 700 years earlier.

To them, and to troubled souls everywhere, Jesus preached: "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**" Jesus is calling us to recognize the darkness we walk in and repent of every time we've looked for hope and answers in wrong and sinful places. The answer to our sin and guilt is not found in the religions of the world, nor in philosophy, nor in fortune tellers, nor in paid counselors, nor in self-help books, nor in distraction techniques. The answer to our sin and guilt is found in the one and only light of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Repent, he says! Change the way you think and act. Recognize the destructive nature of sin and disobedience to God. Turn humbly to God, acknowledging your guilt. And then let your soul rejoice and waves of peace wash over you as the kingdom of heaven not only draws near, but enters into your heart and fills you! For Jesus said, (Luke 17:21) "The Kingdom of God is within you."

When and how does this kingdom come to you? It comes through this Word of God you are hearing right now! Hear this good news: Jesus Christ is the Son of God from eternity. He was born of the virgin Mary: true God and true man in one person. He was holy and blameless. He [**prophet**] proclaimed the pure, whole truth of God to people. He healed the sick. Raised the dead back to life. By his preaching and deeds, he was shown to be God's Son and the world's Savior. Our great **King** came to battle our worst enemies: Satan, sin and death. He came to win a victory we could never win for ourselves. Jesus, our great **High Priest**, offered for you and to me the exact sacrifice for sin and guilt that was needed: his own innocent body and blood. He suffered and died on the cross as the payment and substitute for our sins. How can we be sure these great and eternally important claims and promises are valid and true? Look at the **empty grave**. Jesus' lifeless body came back to life. The payment for sin is complete! Jesus really saved us! You really do have complete and total peace with the Holy and Righteous God.

This Word of God that I have just proclaimed to you is the light for your path. It is the help and guidance you are yearning for. It is the answer to your deepest questions and gives hope that never fails. This Word of God is a light for your feet and lamp for your path!

You know this Word of God is true, don't you? You trust Jesus is your Savior and has removed your sin and guilt forever, right? Well, you know what? That same Word and the same Savior are with you in every other aspect of your life too! So I have a challenge for you. Starting already this week, would you recommit yourself to *daily* Bible study? Do you want light for your path? It's right there on your bookshelf. It's freely available for to download onto your MP3 player. The light you are looking for is there and it's accessible. The question is, *will you make use of it?*

Now, I want you to succeed in this assignment. Some of you may already read your Bible daily. Others, maybe you've fallen out of the habit. For those who are currently out of the habit, here's what you need to start:

- 1) You need a specific time when you will read. Could you, right now, block out 10 or 15 minutes out of your day when you will open your Bible and read? Decide right now when you will do it. First thing in the morning? Over the lunch hour? Right before bed at night? What works for you. Have you got the time set.
- 2) What are you going to read? If you don't have a plan, here's a suggestion: Start with one of the four Gospels. Refresh in your mind the life of Jesus. Isn't that a great place to start? Matthew, Mark, Luke, John... they're all good. Start reading one *this week!* Another suggestion: Read a Psalm too. Read it after you read a portion from the Gospel. Or read it every other day. Gospel one day, Psalm the next day, depending on how much time you have. Done with a Gospel? Try an epistle: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Hebrews. Your choice. When you finish that? Hit the book of Genesis! That's enough for now. When you get that far, see me and I'll tell you where to go next!
- 3) One more thing: both before and after reading, pray. Ask God's help in understanding the text. Afterwards, let the text you read shape what you pray for. See how that goes.
- 4) One more suggestion: Come to Sunday morning Bible class. We're currently studying the book of Acts. Today, chapter 3. Get into the word with your fellow believers and see if God doesn't light up your world!

Friends, get into the Word of God and you will have the only light for your path. And what Isaiah prophesied will be true for you too: **“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”** Amen