

Matthew 4:12-25 “Called to the Light”

January 22, 2017

Did you notice it this week? Are you dragging this morning? The fog outside seems to have crept into my brain. Monday was the third Monday of January and sources say that it represents the gloomiest day of the year. Still, we're only one third of the way through winter. The after Christmas bills have hit your mailbox. The days are starting to get longer, but not so as you'd notice. All your neighbours and most of your friends have gone to Florida, or Arizona, or Mexico or the Caribbean. The next day off is family day, and maybe you don't even get that day off. The weather is miserable no matter where you live. It's too cold, too wet, too icy, or too snowy, and no matter what it is, there's too much of it. There's just too much weather out there and we want it to stop.

It's a heavy time of year emotionally too. Wednesday this week is “Let's Talk Day” with a call to focus on and talk about mental health issues. This is the time of year for seasonal affective disorder and the sponsors want to call attention to all types of mental and emotional difficulties that are all too often misunderstood and ignored, post-partum depression, suicide . . . the list goes on. People don't want to talk about those kinds of things, hence the call to “let's talk”.

It is also a spiritually heavy time of year as we struggle to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus amid all the distractions in the world and in the news. Maybe you've given up watching the news and praying. Your prayer life wanes. Your devotional life suffers. The hype of the holidays is over. The Christmas music is done. The next thing to look forward to is Lent, and that may or may not be a good thing. The Christmas season brought so much promise, but now in the days of Epiphany, we feel lost and forgotten like those Old Testament towns of Zebulun and Naphtali. Let me tell you what that means.

Start by looking at the Old Testament lesson and the Old Testament history leading up to it. First, Moses led the 12 tribes out of Egypt. Then, Joshua led the 12 tribes into the Promised Land and each tribe was assigned their own share of the Promised Land. The plan was to conquer the land and drive out or destroy the inhabitants so Israel could live in the land in peace. Now, before you get upset that a loving God could have commanded them to do that, you need to know that the instruction to destroy places like Jericho and burn them to the ground was God's judgement on centuries of ever-growing wickedness and idol worship, child sacrifice, and unbelief. That day of judgement upon the peoples of Canaan was actually prophesied in Genesis 15:16. God had said to Abraham:

“In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here (to the promised land), for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

Listen to what Deuteronomy 18 says about the sins of the Amorites:

“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a wizard or a necromancer, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you.”

That's why, under Joshua, God's people were to drive them out of the land of Canaan. But that conquest didn't quite go as planned because God's own people were unfaithful with the result that God no longer drove out their enemies before them. Instead He left them where they were. The Canaanites and others in the land would continue to be a thorn in the side of God's people. They would serve as a constant reminder of the need to rely on God every day and trust in God at all times. You see that plan in action all through the book of Judges. God's people would forsake the Lord and forget His promises. So God would let some enemy inflict trouble and suffering on them.

When they came to their senses and repented, God would raise up a champion to deliver them. Peace would last for a time until the next generation or two came along and would forsake the Lord, and each one “would do what was right in their own eyes” and the cycle would repeat itself.

So now, today, when you look around the world and shake your head and start to ask how people can abandon their faith and fall so deeply into sin so fast, now you have the answer. “Each one did what was right in their own eyes.” Now, travel down the centuries and see what transpired among God’s people. Twelve tribes were ruled by one king under Saul, and then David, and then Solomon. But after Solomon the nation was split into north and south, ten tribes in the north, called Israel, and two tribes in the south called Judah.

In the north things rapidly went from bad to worse, to terrible, to unbearable and in 722 BC those ten tribes were conquered by the kingdom of Assyria and they pretty much ceased to exist as a nation. Those left behind were abandoned. It was a time of gloom and despair, increasing anguish and growing darkness. Would the light ever come back? If you look at a map of how the tribes were laid out in the north, that land of Zebulun and Naphtali were in the middle of that mess of the peoples and the places forsaken by God. And in the middle of the mess was the Sea of Galilee. To get a feel for that kind of depression and abandonment, you don’t need to look much farther than the falling-into-ruin areas of any big city or tour the abandoned lands where once-thriving industries have been left to crumble. You don’t have to go to rust belt cities in Ohio or abandoned factories in Michigan. Forlorn neighbourhoods and vacant industrial lands can be found right here in Hamilton, Niagara, Oshawa, or Windsor.

I want you to fast-forward now to the days of the New Testament and the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Now it’s called Galilee. We have this idyllic Eden-like picture of Galilee during the time of Jesus and His disciples. We close our eyes and see gentle winds rippling the waves of the lake on a summer afternoon. Lush green shores, tree shaded glens and hillsides covered with sheep and their lambs playing in the grass. Pretty little boats plying the waters, their white linen sails gently flapping in the breeze. Beautiful little white buildings covered with red clay tiles, busy marketplaces with tables laden with fresh fruits and vegetables. My guess is, it wasn’t like that. It was more like grey people wearing grey clothes, walking grey streets, disappearing into grey shacks, the sick and the blind and the lame wearing only dirty rags, dirty hands left to beg for scraps. It’s as if the whole land is a refugee camp. And it is to this dark and weary place that Jesus comes and brings light, and hope, and healing, and forgiveness,

When the right time came here in Galilee after centuries of darkness, the light began to shine and grow. Jesus began to preach: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. He also began to gather disciples. You know the story: Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. This gathering of disciples was not the way it was usually done. When a child reached the age of 6 years old, he or she would start their study at the local torah school. They would come to the local synagogue and be taught by the local torah teacher. They would learn by memory the first five books of the Old Testament, the five books of Moses. No, not just the titles, the whole text of the books. This would last until they were around 10 years old and for most children, that was all the formal education they would have. From here, they would go on to apprentice at a trade, or learn the family business, or learn how to manage a household. But if a child studied hard and showed an aptitude for learning, if they were the best in the class, they would keep going and would continue their education. After that, most would go back to some family trade or business or an apprenticeship. But the best of the best would continue on yet again to the next level of education. They would seek out a Rabbi and they would apply to become one of that Rabbi’s disciples. They would begin to assimilate all that the Rabbi knew, and to become more and more like their Rabbi. They would take on his yoke, learn what he knows, do what he does, and they would follow after him. They would literally “wear his dust”.

The usual approach was for a promising young man to apply, be questioned and evaluated, and be judged. Can this kid sit in front of me? Can this kid do what I do? Can this kid carry my yoke? Does this kid have what it takes? If the applicant answered well, but really wasn’t the best of the best of the best, the Rabbi would send him on his way.

Go home, learn your family trade, you don't have what it takes. Only the very best of the best of the best would be worth the rabbi's time and effort. The rest, the "left behinds", lived at home and worked on the family farm or the family boat or the family business, or hired themselves out to some dead end, hand to mouth, pay check to pay check, subsistence job. That's the way life was.

So now, when Jesus begins His ministry, what does He do? He calls Andrew and Peter and James and John to follow Him. That's the wrong way around. They were fishermen. They weren't following another rabbi. They were not the best of the best of the best. They hadn't made the cut. When Jesus comes to bring the good news of the kingdom of God, His approach was the opposite. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit. (John 15:16) What's going on here? What is Jesus doing?

This is from next week's epistle reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

Jesus comes to announce that the kingdom of heaven is near and that light has come to a dark place. This coming kingdom is different from anything that the world has seen before. He is bringing a different kind of kingdom. It is not built on merit but on grace. It is not founded on the strength of man but on the mercy of God. Following Jesus will be different from anything that the world has seen before.

In John 15, Jesus says to the twelve, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead I have called you friends for everything I learned from my Father I have made known to you." Back in the day, if you applied to a Rabbi to follow him and learn from him and study under him, you were signing up for indentured servitude. Yours was the life of an unpaid intern, just happy to be there and work for nothing. You would die for your Rabbi. But here, Jesus would die for His disciples. He came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. The kingdom that He announces and that He brings is different. It comes quietly. Like a small seed, it grows in secret. The light of Christ is not just shining *on* Galilee of the Gentiles, but shining *for* them. Jesus takes up His public ministry right where John left off. He uses the precise words of John the Baptizer, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Today light has dawned in the midst of the darkness. Jesus' first disciples are called: come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. No one becomes Jesus' disciple on his own accord. It's not your decision or an act of your will. It is His grace working in the hearts of sinners. Who does He call? He calls the sinful, hurting, downtrodden people. He gives light, life, hope, and deliverance as He goes about Galilee teaching and proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom. Matthew tells us that Jesus went throughout the region healing every disease and every affliction among the people. Everyone who was brought He healed, from those with diseases to those oppressed by demons to paralytics. The light was spreading and the darkness was being chased away.

Here was great good news that Isaiah was looking forward to. Darkness would no longer have the upper hand. The Creator of light has sent His Son, Jesus, to pierce what seemed to be impenetrable darkness, breaking the rod of our oppressor and pushing back all the evil he has inflicted on us. The kingdom of God had come and it has come here too. Light in the darkness, hope for the hopeless, help for the helpless. Even on a dark day, you can rejoice in the light of Christ.