

Epiphany 3 2011 “Following the Light of the World”
Matt. 4:12-23

Jesus came as a great light in the darkness. Matthew quotes Isaiah 9 as he describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. **“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...and for those who sat in the shadow of death light has dawned.”**

The image Matthew uses is “sitting” in darkness, sitting in the shadow of death. The image is one of inability to move, walk, work, live. One needs light to do these things. The people were stuck in darkness, trapped in the shadow of death unable to move...until the light came among them. The **“great light”** came into the darkness when Jesus came and began to preach and teach. His word was like a lightening in the darkness. His word enlightened everyone who heard it. His word poured light into the darkness of a blind man’s eyes. His word straightened crooked arms and crippled legs. His word gave health to the sick, strength to the weak, life to the dead. The word of Jesus had power, the power of God to call people out of darkness and into the light of life.

The first sermon of Jesus was brief. **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** This brief sermon really says it all. Jesus was the incarnation of God among us. The king of heaven had come to earth. Jesus’ sermon is law and gospel put together in one sentence. Repent! God is among us! Our response can not be to dredge up a list of our accomplishments. His one sentence sermon calls into question our lives, our priorities, our loves, and our loyalties. They are all screwed up. We do not love God with our whole heart. We do not love our neighbors as ourselves. We have proven that we cannot live together in harmony. God is among us in Jesus and his command is to “repent”, that’s the law. To repent means to admit our sin and ask God to forgive us for our failures, our sin, our rebellion, our self-satisfied, self-focused indulgence and our wanton neglect of the needs of others. Jesus says, **“Repent”**. That is how we prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus’ sermon confronts us and calls us to repent. But then, immediately, he gives us hope, **“The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** God did not send Jesus to destroy us but to save us. John 3:16, the most quoted and best loved verse of scripture, is followed by vs. 17, **“For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that thru him the world might be saved.”**

Jesus' sermon is law and gospel put together in one sentence. Jesus immediately went from preaching this simple, yet profound Law/Gospel sermon into calling his disciples.

“As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, called Peter and Andrew his brother.” Jesus called to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him.” People respond to the word of Jesus. His word had power then and it has the same power today. Matthew says that “Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and preaching the gospel and healing every disease and infirmity among the people.” These were the marks of his ministry. Teaching, Preaching, and Healing. These are still the marks of the church today. We teach the word of God as revealed in scripture. We preach the good news that your life, bound by sin, can be set free in Jesus. Sins are forgiven by the word of Jesus and that word heals broken lives. The word of Jesus has power to change your life. It lifts you out of darkness and into the light. It calls you into in the light of God's love. It makes you want to share the light with others, it makes you “fishers of men”.

All this comes to you by the simple yet powerful word of God. That word is heard when you hear about Jesus. That word is heard when you read the Bible. That word is present in your life through the work of the Spirit of God. That word calls you to faith. You can take no credit for coming to God. The bible doesn't say that Peter and Andrew and James and John were looking for Jesus or that they decided to follow him. No, the bible says that they heard his word “**follow me**” and immediately they left everything and followed him. His word has power and it has changed their lives and it changes your life. His word is a word of grace and forgiveness. His word is a word of hope and encouragement. His word is a word of comfort and peace and an invitation, “Your sins are forgiven! Follow me!”

Angie and I had dinner recently with some friends from out of state. They told us about the congregation they were attending that was struggling with internal dissension. We listened to their description of conflict, lack of agreement on the direction the congregation was taking. Then they told us the name of the congregation... “Joyful Servant Lutheran Church”. Angie's immediate comment was, “That's the problem! They have taken their eyes off Jesus.” To name your church “Joyful Servant Lutheran” is like naming it “Good Sheep Lutheran”. It misses the whole point of who we are as followers of Jesus! We don't focus on being “good sheep” we focus on the

“Good Shepherd”. If we focus on being “Joyful Servants” we focus on what we are doing and inevitably end up in conflict and dissension. The church is called to point to and follow Jesus.

A seminary professor of mine once wrote, “Whenever the Christian faith has won followers, it has done so NOT thru its theology or philosophy, but thru this tantalizing, magnetic, bewildering, comforting, and inspiring Person. It is Jesus who wins and holds people. They learn to love his church, because he is there. They live lives of love, because they are captured by his love. They fight for causes of justice and mercy, because he is in the thick of the fight. They learn to care for the earth, because “the earth is the Lord’s”.” (Alvin Rogness in The Lutheran Standard, Jan, 2, 1979).

“For us who live in the light there is but one option... It is the option given to Peter and John and James and Paul. We must spread the light. We must use every resource to see that we become channels of the Light in this world, where darkness is pressing in at all times. Nor must we lose hope. Our Lord is the true Light, after all.” (ibid. Rogness).

God’s powerful word has come to you again today in the words of Jesus “**Repent, the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Come follow me!**” Jesus calls you out of darkness into the light. In that light you can live and breathe and work in the joy that comes from knowing that you are chosen by God. This is good news. The light overcomes the darkness. The great light of Christ Jesus has shined on you and you walk in that light as a follower of Jesus. The shadows can no longer frighten you. Death no longer has dominion over you. You live in the light of Christ, so walk as a child of the light, chosen by God and called to follow Jesus, the light of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.