

"From Darkness Into Light "

Matthew 4:12-17

January 26,2014

The 3rd Sunday After the Epiphany

Have you ever experienced total darkness? I'm sure all of us have been in some very dark places, but, no matter how dark they are, there always seems to be some ambient light around that keeps it from being 100% dark. One place to experience total darkness is in a cavern underground.. I (Pastor Schlund) had the opportunity to do that once. When I stood in a great room within that cavern and the guide turned off all the lights, I experienced darkness: total, complete, and absolute darkness. And it was horrible.

It was, first of all, a frightening experience. I could not see my hand in front of my face or any of the other people in our tour group standing around me. It was total isolation in a dark, dank dungeon of darkness and that scared me.

It was also a potentially very dangerous experience. In total darkness, I knew that there was no way that I could find my way out of that cavern on my own. I would surely trip and fall, probably breaking an arm or a leg. No one would ever find me and I would die there. I remember standing as still as I could, trying not to move an inch.

What did I need there? I didn't need an explanation of how dark it was there, nor did I need someone to encourage me to try my best to get out of the darkness and find the light at the entrance to the cavern. I needed light.

When the tour guide turned on the light after about 30 seconds (although it seemed like 30 minutes), I have never been so relieved. The fear which the darkness caused was gone immediately. Plus, I knew that I was safe. In the light, the guide was able to lead all of us out of the cavern and into the light which he soon did.

A similar thing is going on in our Gospel reading for today. St. Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah who speaks of "people dwelling in darkness". Darkness is a popular Biblical metaphor for sin. People think they know what sin is because they've seen people do bad things like I thought I knew

what darkness was because I had been in a dark room. But sin is not dark behavior. Sin is darkness: total, complete, and absolute spiritual darkness. That's the situation each of us is born into – the spiritual equivalent of that dark cavern I was in.

It's a scary situation to be in. Spiritual darkness isolates us just as physical darkness does. It cuts us off from a relationship with God. It cuts us off from relationships with each other. Being isolated and alone makes people afraid. They may not know that sin is the cause of this isolation, but they do know that they don't like it.

Spiritual darkness is also very dangerous. It is the cause of every danger in our world: war, crime, interpersonal conflicts, suffering, sickness, pain, and death. We wander around in the spiritual darkness, trying to find a way out of this mess, but we can't. We can't see a way out. We can't find a way out. We can't get out. What Isaiah said about the people of his time is true for the people of our time: we "dwell in the region and shadow of death."

What is needed to combat spiritual darkness? When we find ourselves in the horror and danger of spiritual darkness, we don't need to be told how awful the darkness is. That won't help. Nor do we need encouragement to leave the darkness and find our way out of this mess. That won't work. We need light. The good news Matthew has for us is today is that light has come.

When Jesus appeared in Galilee, in the Old Testament territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, to begin His public ministry, He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah who had written, "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."

A light does two basic things. It gets rid of darkness and it provides illumination. That's what Jesus had come to do. He said that Himself, "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)

Jesus got rid of spiritual darkness by going to war with the Prince of Darkness, Satan. Immediately before this text, Matthew gives us the account of Jesus' temptation by the devil. Jesus emerged victorious in that battle, but the war was not over. It would continue throughout the three

years of Jesus' public ministry and would come to a climax one dark Friday afternoon on a cross outside of Jerusalem. There, Jesus would bear the darkness of sin and the gloom of guilt for the entire world – for you and for me. When He died in shame and sorrow on that dark and gloomy day, it seemed as if darkness had won and that the Prince of Darkness had triumphed.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Three short days later, from the shadow of death, a new light dawned. Jesus rose from the darkness of death and the grave to light and life. That was no magic trick to astound people nor a personal triumph for His own benefit. By dying with the sin of the world on His back and by rising from the dead with it gone, the Scripture says, Christ Jesus "has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Timothy 1:10)

This Gospel – this "good news" – brings us relief from all of our fears brought on by the darkness of sin. With the light brought into our lives by Jesus' death and resurrection, we know there is no reason to ever be afraid, no matter how gloomy the situation appears to be. We see clearly now that there is a God who loves us deeply, who cares for us daily, and who is with us always.

Despite the conflict and turmoil that sin brings into our world and into our lives, we experience the "peace of God, which transcends all understanding," which will "will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" no matter what situation ever comes our way. (Philippians 4:7)

More than that, the light which Jesus is ultimately provides us with a way out of this sad darkness in which we find ourselves. We have hope for the future, no matter how bad our past has been and how bleak our present might be. As Jesus promised, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. (John 11:25-26)

What a fantastic message we have for the world around us and the people in it who are still dwelling in darkness and in the region and shadow of death! The message is the same one that Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

"Repent!" sounds negative, but it really isn't. It simply means that it's time to change from darkness to light and that's a good thing. The reason it seems bad and often meets with resistance is

because people are so engulfed in sin that they are blind to their need to leave the darkness of sin and go into the light of God's love. Therefore, in speaking of the darkness of sin to your friends and family, you will often be accused of being "negative", "judgmental", and "uncaring." People will ignore you and try to find their own way out of spiritual darkness through devotion to their jobs, their families, their possessions, or their pleasures. They will just keep wandering around and around while you, who are in the light, will look on in frustration and heartache.

But don't become disheartened. Remember – the kingdom of heaven – the rule and blessing of our God is here now, even if those blinded by the darkness of sin can't see it. What do you do? The temptation will be to nag those who are in spiritual darkness or to lay guilt trips on them. But that won't work. That will only reinforce them in their darkness.

The only way to get rid of this darkness is by pouring light on it – the light of Jesus. Each of you is a lamp through which the light of Jesus is to shine to those who are in darkness. As Jesus said, "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (Matt. 5:16). Shine the light of Jesus' love to those around you by exhibiting the love of Jesus in all that you say, think or do.

By doing that, you will then gain the opportunity to shine the light of Jesus' message to those around you at a time when they are ready to hear it. You will be able to speak of the full forgiveness, perfect peace, and everlasting hope that you have in and through Jesus Christ to friends, family, those who have fallen away from Christ, and those who have never known Him. In doing that, they will have "seen a great light" and "on them a light has dawned."

Epiphany is all about light. Through the light of a star, God revealed His Son, Jesus, to the Magi from the East. Through the Light of the World, Jesus Christ, God has revealed His mercy, His love, His hope, His peace, and His eternal life for all humanity. Through His light shining in and through each of you, God will call people out of darkness and into His wonderful light. God grant that you remain in His light and be His light bearer to the world! Amen.