

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 22, 2017
Matthew 4:12-25
"The Light in the Darkness"

This is the season of Epiphany, a word that literally means, "To shine upon." This season of the church year, in between the celebration of His birth at Christmas and preparation for His death in Lent, is especially about how Jesus makes Himself known for grace and salvation. And here is your hope, dear hearers in Christ: The Lord will make Himself known. He visits with salvation such far ranging places as Zebulun, Naphtali, Libby and wherever else you may find yourself.

The Word of the Lord from St. Matthew, chapter 4: "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" (Mt. 4:16).

This Word of the Lord was first spoken by the prophet Isaiah about the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. There they were, up at the northern tip of Israel; and for centuries that had been a blessed place to be. Although they were a long way from the temple in Jerusalem, they had some of the most beautiful, fertile land in the nation. But by the time Isaiah spoke, this was not a good place to be. Time and time again, foreign kings had invaded Israel by swooping in from the north, making Zebulun and Naphtali their first victims. In the past, too, the kingdom of Israel had split, and so these northerners were cut off from the temple, the place of God's gracious presence. But in Isaiah's time, the end was near. The Assyrian empire was growing, expanding-and the northern kingdom was a sitting duck. It was only a matter of time until the bloodthirsty Assyrians came to Israel, and a look at the map showed how they would gain entry. Naphtali and Zebulun were living in the shadow of death, because the Assyrians were not known for mercy toward anyone.

And so it happened that the northern kingdom fell, and the ten tribes-including the people of Zebulun and Naphtali-were taken into captivity, never to be heard from again. In the course of history, boundaries would shift and others would populate the area. By the time of Jesus, it was the northern area of Galilee; and because of its diverse population, it was well-described as "Galilee of the Gentiles." The once-fertile land was now mostly desert, and the people had again suffered at the hands of foreign armies; for, once again looking at a map, it's not difficult to figure how the Romans entered Galilee and Judea.

The shadow of death seemed to darken Zebulun and Naphtali quite a bit. But then again, death always seeks to overshadow us.

But it is here that the Light shines in our Gospel lesson today. When John the Baptizer is imprisoned, Jesus withdraws into Galilee, to Caesarea and the area of Naphtali. He continues to preach John's sermon-the sermon that He had given John to preach: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Oh, listen, you inhabitants, for you are not forgotten. Although you have been the highway for bloodthirsty kings and the horsemen of the apocalypse, a different King

stands among you. He desires to give you grace and faith and salvation, so that you might live with Him forever. He does not want to take from you your riches and life; instead, He wants to take away your sins and your death. You are not forgotten. Light is shining in the darkness. The Lord has come to chase away the shadow of death. Repent-turn from those sins that would destroy you. The time is now, because the King is present-not to enslave and kill, but to set free and give life.

The Lord of life is with them, for He will find His people wherever they are to be found. Now, as He goes about His saving work, see how He does it. For one thing, He's establishing His credentials-He's proving He's the Savior predicted by the Old Testament. Isaiah said He would heal, so He is healing all sorts of diseases. Isaiah said He would do so for Zebulun and Naphatali, so there He is. But beyond the miracles to verify who He is, look at how this King spreads His kingdom.

He preaches. He goes from place to place and speaks. He teaches in the synagogues, walking from town to town. Now, He's also making plans to expand His efforts: in our Gospel lesson, He calls four men to be His disciples, and He'll boost that number to twelve. He'll teach and train them for a while, and then He'll send them out to do the same thing: speak His Word to other people. Those disciples will perform a few miracles on His authority, though the signs and wonders will die down after a while. But even when the signs and wonders are gone, His followers will still be speaking His Word. People will hear about Him, and they'll share the news with one another. By the faith given in the Word, they'll seek out Jesus where He is found, where He is at hand.

That's how the King goes about spreading His kingdom of light and life in the New Testament.

Now, you may well be thinking, "Of course that's how He does it." This is the first century, A.D. It's not a high-tech society-there is no radio, no cell towers, no cable, no satellite dishes, no internet. The quickest that news can travel is the speed of the fastest horse. But I would point out that this King is greater than the times in which He walks the earth: this is, after all, the Creator of all things. And although He has become flesh and fully human, He remains fully God. If He chose, He could thunder the message of the Gospel from the heavens, so that everyone would hear it at once. He could write it in the sky, or place the message immediately on every heart if He wanted to do it that way. But He doesn't. Instead, He chooses the seemingly impractical way of walking from town to town, speaking in the synagogues to those who will hear. From a human standpoint, it seems like He could make better use of His talents and time.

Yet, in His infinite and gracious wisdom, this is how the Savior goes about bringing light where there is only the shadow of death. Rejoice, Zebulun and Naphtali, for your King walks among you so humble and merciful that you may miss Him if you're not listening. But be assured, Galilee of the Gentiles-His presence among you guarantees that you are not forgotten. Though you have too often been the highway for death and destruction, the King of Life walks among you now. A few years from now, Titus will bring more Roman armies through, and Zebulun and Naphtali will suffer once again; but before then Jesus will win salvation for the world by His

death on the cross. Ironic, isn't it? For proclaiming that all who believe will have life in His name, man puts the Lord of life to death. But although His methods may seem inefficient, His death atones for the sins of the world, and He will make sure that He does not miss a single one who will believe. He will make sure His Word is heard: and that same Word that created the heavens and the earth creates grace and eternal life in you.

Now, we can talk about the dangers of living in Zebulun and Naphtali all we want; truth is, though, that no matter how dangerous it seemed back there, back then, they experienced the same mortality rate that we do in the civilized United States of America and indeed all the world. No matter how much we want to sanitize and shield ourselves from it, the truth is that we also dwell in the shadow of death. Tsunamis. Dirty bombs. Terrorist attacks. Genocide. Stroke, heart attack, cancer, diabetes. The car that runs the red light at high speed.

Along with all those threats that society recoils against, there are also plenty of ways that man has sought to befriend death and reject life. Forty-four years ago the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* determined that the shadow of death could reach into the womb as a matter of convenience. Such contempt for the helpless unborn will only lead to contempt for the helpless outside of the womb. Mankind continues to glorify immorality, though it leads to disease and death itself. It's trendier to defend trees or whales than human beings today. The list goes on and on.

And these deal only with physical death. Do not forget our Lord's warning: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt. 10:28). These many participations of man in death are simply symptoms of the greater problem: those who reject the Lord's grace are already dead in their trespasses and sins. They are the living dead, and it is only inevitable that those who reject God will seek to justify death as a helper, a solace, a friend.

In such a world, it is easy to become discouraged. It is even easier when this gets personal. The evening news can often be enough to depress, when the shadow of death darkens the lives of people halfway around the world. But sooner or later, that death casts its silhouette into your life, too. The onslaught of disease, the loss of a friend or even a near miss each reminds us that our greatest enemy patiently stalks each one of us, too.

Easy to be discouraged, even despairing. That's why, even as our society does its best to ignore death or make it sound like a kind companion, it is full of desperate, despairing people.

Do not despair, for the Word of the Lord remains: "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." Death may seem ever-present, but the Lord is far more so: He has defeated this enemy and risen again, and He makes sure that His light shines upon those dwelling in darkness.

No, do not despair, little flock. In this world where death reigns because of sin, the Lord faithfully visits His people, whether they are be in Libby or Germany or a lone believer in Sweden. He brings with Him forgiveness and victory over death. This victory is missed by many, because again the Lord comes quietly, mercifully. He spread this grace and victory around Zebulun, Naphtali and Galilee by walking from town to town, preaching His Word; and this is how His evangelism still happens today. As people talked of Jesus and Christians told His Word to others back then, so they do today. While the Lord can accomplish His will without us, He delights to use us as His instruments in the spread of His salvation. People hear the Word and come to Church to hear more, to be catechized-instructed-in the ways of the Lord. Believers gather to hear the Absolution, to be baptized, to receive the Lord's body and blood. It looks ordinary, but know this: the Lord's work will look ordinary. After all, He created this world and set it up to run normally according to His will: therefore, because the Lord's will is the normal way of doing things it will look normal. Rather than have bread fall from heaven each day, He ordains that seeds sprout and grow into grain that is harvested, ground and baked; but as He uses farmers and bakers to supply bread, it is no less the Lord's plan. Likewise, He delights to give forgiveness in His Word and His Sacraments, and they appear quite normal because that's how the Lord normally saves. This is no less a miracle than if the Lord started zapping individuals with salvation via lightning bolts from heaven.

The Lord's way of evangelism will seem ordinary, and it may even seem inefficient as the Church plods toward eternity. But through this we are comforted as well: Christ Jesus will not fail to send forth His Word to save all who will believe. He will not lose one of His beloved children. And as He fulfills that promise, you and I have the privilege of being His instruments.

The Lord continues to visit His people, wherever they are, with life and salvation-because He has shed His blood and given His life to win that gift for them. And the upshot of the cross is this, dear friends: while the shadow of death will stalk you yet in this life, death is nothing more than a shadow for the people of God. It is cold and dark, chilling and fearful, but in Christ it passes and is gone. Whether it be the Christians slaughtered in a Sudanese genocide or the personal agony of a loved one in ICU, the Lord declares, "Death, I am the death of you! Grave, I am your destruction! You can kill my Christians, but I will raise them back to life, forever!"

That is the message of Epiphany, and that is the purpose of evangelism. In this dying world, where death is feared, touted as friend or used for convenience, the Lord of life makes Himself known. He made Himself known in human flesh to die our death and set us free. He makes Himself known in His Word even now, to forgive your sins and give you His victory over the grave. Rejoice, dear people of God, for this victory in Christ is yours with these simple words: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen