

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 9:1-4
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 4:12-23
January 22, 2023

“Light in the Darkness”

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I hate to do this to you again because no one enjoyed it the last time, but today once more a little geography is necessary. Nothing complicated. Just the basics. And a tiny bit of history. I promise. It won't be painful.

The nation of Israel was split into three regions at the time of Jesus. Judah in the south. Samaria in the middle, and Galilee at the top. In terms of status Judah is the Main Line. It had all the money and the snobs. Samaria is Chester. It used to be an impressive place, now not so much. The economy is not great, and the racial mix has changed, which gives further reason for the elites to look down on them. All of the fine upstanding rich white Presbyterian or Episcopalian citizens of an earlier era are gone. Now it's mostly black with a smaller number of Latinos and whites, and if they go to church at all they are Baptists, Pentecostals or members of independent store front churches. Think—the Good Chester Resident, who rescues the man from Wynnewood who has been attacked and left bleeding and gets him to the hospital, while the upscale clergy person, the Penn doctor and the Tech CEO pass him by. And finally, there is little Galilee at the end of the line. Galilee is the region around the small town of Sticks in York County, Pennsylvania. Yes, it really does exist. Someone with a sense of humor must have decided it would be cool to tell people they lived in Sticks. The only thing that would make this analogy perfect would be if we could travel from the Main Line directly through Chester to get to the town of Sticks. Sticks PA has no status. Chester PA used to have status a long time ago. The Main Line is overflowing with status. We go from the snobs to the people they consider inferior because of race and religion to the rednecks in the country, who of course, are also inferior.

The Galilee of Jesus' time was only about 25 by 50 miles large, but much of it was rural. According to the ancient historian Josephus there were about 204 towns or villages, but that's probably a bit of an exaggeration. It was ruled by Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist executed. Herod Antipas could pretty much do what he liked as long as nothing happened to inconvenience Rome. The northernmost part had no cities. It was mountainous and remote. Herod Antipas built two cities in the southern part, Sepphoris, which was actually a rebuild of an earlier city and not far from Nazareth, and Tiberius, his new capital city. Tiberius was built on top of an ancient cemetery. This rendered it unclean so no religious Jew would go there.

Jesus never entered Tiberius, and as far as we know, he never went to Sepphoris either, although he could have because it was so close to Nazareth. Jesus ministered in the tiny villages and towns scattered around the lake, places with a population of 400-500, and out in the middle of the countryside

where people from several villages could gather. There were a few larger towns like Bethsaida with up to 2000-3000 people, but his first miracle was in the tiny village of Cana. His base of operations, Capernaum, was one of the larger towns with about 1000 people. For comparison to all of this, the population of Penn Wynne in 2020 was 5769.

So why Galilee? We know that Jesus did go to Judea, a.k.a the Main Line. He died in Jerusalem. We know that Jesus also went into Samaria, a.k.a. Chester. And he told a powerful parable about the Good Samaritan. But most of Jesus' ministry took place in the tiny region of Galilee, **a place mentioned in the Old Testament**. Long, long ago, this same region was where the three tribes of Zebulun, Naphtali and Asher dwelt. Isaiah prophesied, "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future **he will honor Galilee of the nations**, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan." The "way of the Sea" was an actual physical road connecting Damascus in the northeast with Caesarea in the southwest on the Mediterranean. This is the region in which Jesus conducted most of his ministry. It was in Galilee, not Judah, that he performed most of his miracles. Matthew recognized this and quoted Isaiah's prophecy. "The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

Jesus brought light in the darkness to a region that was considered a backwater by many. Galilee was where the unsophisticated county people lived. Galilee was also a weird mix of Jews in the countryside and Gentiles in the two cities. It was surrounded by pagan nations, and because a major trade route went directly through it, it had often been invaded. Galileans had a lot more contact with non-Jews than people living in Judea. And Galileans also had a reputation for being stubbornly independent and somewhat rebellious where Rome was concerned. New Hampshire's slogan "Live free or die" would have worked perfectly for Galilee.

Matthew 4:12 says Jesus "withdrew" into Galilee after he heard of the arrest of John the Baptist. But this was not fleeing from the scene. Galilee was governed by the man who arrested John. Jesus went into danger not away from it. Herod Antipas was brutally intolerant of anyone who threatened his power. Jesus would have had no reason to believe he was safe when he came proclaiming deliverance and repentance. It may have been his home turf, but that didn't mean it was safe.

The call of the first disciples takes place next, and as I said last week, is presented without context. That may be deliberate. The author may be emphasizing the dramatic nature of Jesus' call on our lives. Peter and Andrew, James and John, left everything to follow Jesus. While they did, in fact, probably know who Jesus was and had very likely spent time with him as we see in the gospel of John, this sense of an abrupt change is also true. It is one thing to attend. It is quite another to make a lifelong commitment.

But what does it mean for light to enter the darkness in Galilee? The original oppressors were the Assyrians. At the time of Jesus, they were the Romans. Political deliverance did not come at either time. Tragically a massacre of the Jewish people at the hands of the Romans took place around

the year 70 and the year 120 during the first and second great rebellions. Around a million people died. These are unimaginable numbers, only eclipsed by the Holocaust. Those who survived did so by taking refuge in a complex of hard to reach but cleverly interconnected caves in the mountainsides of Galilee or fled the country completely. Until reconstituted in the 20th century Israel ceased to be a nation. The light that dawned in the darkness did not come in the form of political deliverance.

We don't want to hear this. We want here and now this world change, but justice is hard to accomplish. It can be done, but it is rarely simple and always costly. It is also sometimes necessary to defend as we did in World War II, but attack is another matter, and war is always deadly. Those who rose up in violent rebellion mistakenly believed that because their cause was just they would win. That's not the world we live in. The Ukrainian cause is just. They won't win without a lot of help.

Jesus called the disciples and us to repent because the kingdom of heaven has come near. **This is a different kingdom.** There are no taxes in this kingdom, and with all due deference to the Salvation Army, no armies. Repentance means to turn around. We are called to make a complete internal turn *away from* a life of selfishness and **to** a life of service. We are called to reject base self-gratification and instead look outside of ourselves. We are called to leave the dark and live in the light.

I do not know the author or origin of this little parable, but I found it to be profound. Once upon a time there was a dark cave, deep down in the ground, underneath the earth and hidden. Because it was so deep in the earth, the light had never been there. The word "light" meant nothing to the cave, who couldn't imagine what "light" might be. Then one day, the sun sent an invitation to the cave, inviting it to come up and visit. When the cave came up to visit the sun it was amazed and delighted, because the cave had never seen light before, and it was dazzled by the wonder of the experience. Feeling so grateful to the sun for inviting it to visit, the cave wanted to return the kindness, and so it invited the sun to come down to visit it sometime, because the sun had never seen darkness. Finally, the day came, and the sun entered the cave, it looked around with great interest, but soon became puzzled and asked the cave, "Where is the darkness?"

When we live in the light, we become a source of the light. We change the world around us as God's light shines through us. Light is a presence. Darkness is an absence. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." By God's grace we can be a channel of God's kingdom of light to those trapped in darkness, and when we ourselves struggle in the dark times, God's healing light is there to bring comfort and strength. All we need to do is turn our face to the Son. Amen

Isaiah 9:1-4

9 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the

future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

² The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

³ You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.

⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.

Matthew 4:12-23

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— ¹⁴ to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.”

¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.