

Advent in Isaiah (Week 3) - Into Darkness Comes a Great Light (Isaiah 9:2, Matthew 4:12-17)

### Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. Yesterday, we returned one more time to the book of Isaiah, one of three Old Testament books that the New Testament uses over and over again to explain the meaning and message of Jesus. In this last Sunday exploring Isaiah during Advent, we returned to the gospel of Matthew and its use of Isaiah 9.2 in its telling of Jesus launching His public ministry.

2. In [Matthew 4.12-17](#), John the Baptist has been arrested for confronting and criticizing the morality of the powers that be, so Jesus leaves central Israel and heads north to the small fishing village of Capernaum in the region of Naphtali and Zebulun (northwest Galilea).

3. In telling this story, Matthew compares what transpired to Isaiah 9.2, which reads, "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles - the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned" (cited in Matt. 4.15-16).

4. This section ends in verse 17 with Jesus proclaiming to the syllable what got John the Baptist in hot water: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near" (compare Matthew [3.2](#) and [4.17](#)). The kingdom of heaven refers to God's reign over all other kingdoms, or that all other authorities and nations are accountable to God. Needless to say, the political and religious leaders didn't care for this message very much. In order to experience this benevolent reign of God, people would need to "repent," which is to change their mind, heart, direction, and choices from what's normal and usual.

5. So, beyond the fact that both Isaiah 9 and Matthew 4.12-17 happen in the same region, what parallels is the writer of Matthew wanting us to see? Two big ones are found in this sentence in Isaiah 9.2, cited in Matt. 4.17: "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

6. In Isaiah 9, describing events around 715 BCE (so 750 years before Matthew 4), the darkness facing the people was the threat of the brutal Assyrian empire, and the aftermath of a terrible national leader (King Ahaz). In Matthew 4, the darkness is equivalent but not the same: people in Jesus' day faced the darkness of living under the oppressive Roman empire, as well as facing the hard truth that prophets like John the Baptist will be resisted and persecuted, not embraced, by leaders.

7. We are not that different from the people in Isaiah and Jesus' day - we too know what it's like to sit in darkness and the shadow of death. Joan Chittister compares the darkness we often face to sensory deprivation: "Psychologists tell us that one of the most difficult conditions a person can be forced to bear is light deprivation. Darkness, in fact, is often used in military captivity or penal institutions to break down an individual's sense of self. Once a person becomes disoriented, once they lose a sense of where they are...every shred of self-confidence shrivels. The giant within them falls and they become whimpering prey of the unknown. The natural instinct to be combative is paralyzed by fear. The spirit of resistance weakens. The



prisoner becomes more pliable, more submissive, more willing to take directions. It disarms a person, this fall into the sinkhole of sensory deprivation. Simple as it may seem, when the lights go out, we simply lose our bearings...We find ourselves alone in the universe, untethered and unprepared...Lightlessness leaves us no internal compass by which to trace or set our steps...The darkness of the soul is no less spiritually punishing than is the loss of physical light to the psyche...It's light we want, not shadow, certainty, not questions. Darkness can be an attack on faith and hope...'Where am I going?,' the soul wants to know. 'When will this be over?,' the mind wants to know. And 'How can I get out of this sightless place I'm in?,' the heart demands."

8. So if living in darkness is half of the connection between Isaiah 9 and Matthew 4, the other half is that those who do live in darkness will see God's great light. In Isaiah 9, that light will be coronation of the next king, Hezekiah, who all hoped would bring joy, freedom from oppression, etc. ([Isaiah 9.3-7](#)). In Matthew's day, the outset of Jesus' public ministry is the coming of God's light.

9. It will be no different for us: Christ is God's light that will break into even our deepest darkness, and in order for us to live in God's light we will likely be required some change in thought, priority, or behavior. As Mark Adams (PCUSA Missionary involved in border and immigration ministry) writes about Matthew 4.12-17, "It is in the darkness of life that Jesus comes and shines. For those of us living the shadows of death, Jesus brings forth life. It is precisely in the midst of bad news, both personal and collective, that God has called us to repent and follow Jesus in proclaiming and living the reality of that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is when darkness seems to overwhelm us that we are called to seek and live God's great light."

10. Here's a poem that attempts to summarize the parallels drawn between Isaiah 9 and the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Matthew 4:

In the Land of Naphtali and Zebulun (Matthew 4.15-16)

Evening stretches long where weary feet tread,  
Where hearts shrink back in their cowering dread,  
Where evil prowls and justice moves too slow,  
Where goodwill falters and friend becomes foe.  
But then the black veil is torn low to high,  
In Christ we are roused by hope's piercing cry.  
God's kingdom draws near undeterred by worst night,  
To shatter the deep gloom and restore our sight,  
Yes, those who sit in darkness have seen a great light.

With stories of sorrow too many to hold,  
While we stumble blind and lost in the cold,  
Each of us pines and prays for the break of day,  
As smoldering embers turn a lifeless gray.  
But Christ arrives, a torch brave, bold, and bright,  
Leading us into a future we did not write,  
Declaring what's to come is better than what's gone,  
Moving us past what's old so God's new era is drawn,  
For to those in the shadow of death a light has dawned.  
Here in the land of Naphtali and Zebulun.