

Walk in the Light

Epiphany 3A

Isaiah 9:14 Matthew 4:12-23

Slide: VBS

One of my favorite weeks of the year here at St. John's is Vacation Bible School - VBS. We have an amazing education ministry team that puts together a unique week for the children of our neighborhood and it's a blast. This year, the theme was THRIVE and each day was about ways that we thrive in Christ through love.

On this particular day, Janet Tolan helped us understand the unsinkable joy of faith by leading us through a game of blindfolds, except instead of the children being led with blindfolds on, the children led the leaders around the church blindfolded. Laughter, fun, and a few bumping into things ensued. But, the point is pretty obvious. Sometimes, we can't see in the dark and we need someone to help lead us in the dark. If you can't see, even if you think you know where to go, it's likely you don't.

I can't tell you how many hospital visits I have made in my years of ministry where the injured person says the following: "I got up from bed to go to the bathroom and tripped over (blank) because it was dark and I could not see. I thought I knew my house enough not to need the light." Sure enough, a broken bone or two later, a head injury, you name it, and they are in need of repair in the emergency room. Being in the dark has its advantages, especially when sleeping, but we most certainly don't want to be stumbling around in it.

Slide: Come Fish for me

You know, when beginning my study of this Gospel reading for this week's sermon, my first thoughts were, "Oh yeah, it's the calling of the disciples - you know - I will make you fish for people - the wonderful gift of God's call for us into ministry, into the world, into identity in Christ. It's easy, too, to first go there; after all, that's the movement of this reading from the imprisonment of John the Baptist, to Jesus' move to Galilee, to then finally including us, his disciples, into his ministry

in the world. It's a very important part of scripture.

But, that's not what caught my attention. It seems that the Gospel writer in this version of the Good News from Matthew wants us to know first and foremost, that the Messiah of God, the inauguration of Jesus, the breaking in of the reign of God, first comes to us through a prophecy, specifically from the prophet Isaiah:

Slide: Isaiah 9

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined."

Actually, this is a really important connection that the Gospel writer is making. Way back, when Isaiah was doing his prophet thing, the people of Israel were walking in darkness. In fact, the Hebrew "walk" here in the Isaiah reading translates closer to "walking" instead of "walked". Now, you grammar nerds will like this. We know that the word "walked" is past tense, as in "he walked", but "walking" is present continuous or progressive;

meaning that it's more than in the present tense. It's continuous. It begins in the present tense but continues on.

Slide: The People Walking

Although it gets translated as past tense in English, it loses its flavor because of this. When Isaiah was prophesying, the people of God were walking in darkness, present continuous, but we see that even at the time of the Gospels, that walking in darkness continued. They had a long time to wait for the Messiah, to be called by the one we know as Jesus. They were in captivity for so long and then waited yet again while being occupied by Rome.

They were walking in darkness still - Waiting, waiting, waiting in darkness.

Of course, it is a metaphor, but think about this: The people of God were desperate to see the light of God, the hope that they longed for. They were a people oppressed, foreigners in their own land. They were ready for something to happen. Is it any wonder then, that the first disciples dropped their nets and everything else to follow? That

hope was a desperate, longing hope. Walking in darkness, they finally had someone to guide them while blindfolded.

Slide: Where Am I?

Are you still walking in darkness? I thought deeply about this question this week as I looked about the world and thought,

“Wait. The light of the world came. Christ is that light and called us to walk in the light of his love, mercy, and justice. So, why is there still darkness? Clearly, some days it just seems like too much of it.”

Slide: Finding your way...

And, this is where the calling of the disciples becomes so important in this Gospel reading for today. Before Jesus calls them to follow him, he exclaims to the people of Galilee, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” The optimal word here is “near.” Jesus does not say it is “here”, but that it is “near”. That is important. Near means that it’s within reach but needs some walking to get to. In other words, walking in darkness, we need the light to lead us out.

Now, I want to make sure that I don’t communicate that Jesus is saying here that the Kingdom of heaven is in heaven, which means that when we die, we will finally know what that means. He isn’t saying that God’s Kingdom is somewhere else far off, in another dimension, time and place. Rather, Jesus is calling us to a nearness of the Kingdom, one that needs completion, one that continues to need the redeeming, loving, and righteous love of God. It’s God’s reign coming to us, not the other way around. It is near us. We can grasp it with God’s help. Turning, we look to that reign through the person of Jesus Christ, so that, we may live as people of light here on earth, proclaiming that same reign.

Slide: The Kingdom of Heaven

...Which means that the darkness is still there even though light shines upon it. It means that Jesus doesn’t promise that his coming in the world will expel everything difficult, nor does it promise that suffering will not happen in our lives. We continue often walking in darkness or at least, we often wonder if we are and why we are. But, we look to

Christ to lead us around within it. By calling us into the WAY of Jesus, we look to the world as people who work towards that near Kingdom, so near that we almost can see it, we can experience pieces of it, and know it when it breaks in to our lives.

In what ways do you experience walking in darkness today? How can Christ guide you to walk in the light? Perhaps you have not been able to grapple with depression; perhaps you are ill; perhaps you have lost your faith and it feels lifeless and dull; perhaps you experience grief; perhaps you are disappointed with how the world is and how even our country has become. Everywhere we look, it appears darkness is there instead of the light.

Slide: Quilt Sunday

And yet, that place of darkness is exactly where Christ meets us at the cross. The Kingdom of God is right there crucified – the breaking in of God’s light hangs on a tree. The wounds of Jesus are yours. They belong to you, which means that the promise of the Resurrection also does. Looking around and

seeing that light in the world, while some days taking work to do so, it is indeed there! The hope of Christ is here in this place. It is in your neighbor. It is in Australia and the Philippines where rescue and respite happen. It is in the City of Eau Claire with the hard work of building affordable housing and seeing that children have weekend meals. It is here, but sometimes we need Christ to call us out of the darkness, take off our blindfolds and follow him to see where it is. For the Kingdom of Heaven is not only in Heaven. It is near.

This wonderful Gospel, the Good News of Jesus through the eyes of Matthew bids us to follow Christ despite any darkness we may encounter. As the first disciples did, we do the same, but wherever we walk in darkness, we have Christ to lead us, to shine upon our path and help us to clear the way for the Reign of God to come. Amen.