**Light and Hope in the Darkness**

**Text: Matthew 4:16**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Many years ago, when I was living and serving churches in Canada, I decided that I was overdue for a visit to my sister and her family, who lived in Indianapolis. Things were pretty busy at church and I didn’t have a whole lot of time to spare so I decided to drive the 9 hours from Toronto to Indy through the night. It’s one of the things that you do when you’re young, and dumb…and male. You work all week, you preach the morning *and* evening services, and then you get in the car and drive all night. So I’m on I-69, somewhere near the Michigan-Indiana line, and I realize that the car is losing power. Then the engine stalls. And now I’m on the side of the road, sitting in the dark, and I was not seeing a great light! Somehow I manage to get the car started again, and I limp the rest of the way to Indy. It’s mostly downhill from the Michigan line anyway. The car died in my sister’s driveway.

“I’ll have it ready in a week,” the mechanic said. But for some folks, “a week” doesn’t mean *next* week. It means *a* week, *sometime*, before Jesus returns. So one week turned into 10 days, and then 11, and every day the mechanic said, “It’ll be ready tomorrow.” And now I’m *really* sitting in the dark, not knowing if I should believe him, or what I should do. I finally decided that I had to take matters into my own hands. So I bought a bus ticket, headed back to Toronto – once again traveling through the night – and returned home to my congregation, who’d graciously extended my vacation by a week in light of the car issues. It took *another* week – 3 weeks total – before the car was finally fixed. It’s hard to do ministry without a car. Those were some dark days.

“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.” So says Matthew, echoing the words of Isaiah, as he begins the story of Jesus’ ministry. Matthew is using Isaiah’s words as a prophesy of Jesus’ coming; except that he’s made a major change. The Prophet Isaiah, preaching some 700 years earlier, said, “The people who *walked* in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa. 9:2). Matthew changes “walked” to “sat,” and that adds a new dimension to the condition of the people who awaited the coming of the Christ. When you’re walking in the darkness, at least you’re moving. You might be confused, or moving in the wrong direction, but at least you’ve taken some initiative and you’re trying to get somewhere. When you’re *sitting* in the darkness, maybe you’ve allowed the darkness to overwhelm you. Maybe you’ve given-up. Matthew says that the people of 1st century Palestine were sitting in the darkness: overcome by despair or discouragement or grief. And with good reason. They had lost their freedom to the Romans. Their efforts to fight them off had been thwarted. Loved ones were being killed simply because they dared to speak their minds about religion or politics or anything else. Now even John the Baptist had been arrested!

The people sat in the darkness. Despair and grief and betrayal can paralyze you. It was true of Jews and Gentiles in 1st century Palestine, and it’s true of people today. Who among us hasn’t known a time when the darkness has had such a grip on our souls that we haven’t been able to move. Like those dark days when I didn’t know what was going on with my car. Except, of course, it’s much worse when it’s not a car, but a loved one or a great leader or a vision of the future that’s died.

The people sat in the darkness. And then Jesus appeared on the scene. Our English Bibles simply say, “Then Jesus came from Galilee…to be baptized by John.” But the original Greek sounds more like Jesus “made his appearance.” As if he’d just stepped on to a stage. The great drama of history is unfolding and the star has just made his entrance.

Jesus appeared on the scene. And the people saw a great light. A light shining in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it. Jesus appeared, bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. First of all, Jesus himself had to see the light. Then he had to share the light. And the people had to receive the light. Otherwise, they would’ve still been sitting in the darkness. Seeing, sharing and receiving the light. Let’s explore these 3 themes in turn.

The good news begins when Jesus’ sees the light. Which occurred, Matthew says, when Jesus was baptized by John. Many scholars argue that Jesus was initially a disciple of John’s. Which makes sense. John was his older cousin, John baptized him, and the gospels seem to bend over backwards, trying to prove Jesus’ superiority to John. It feels like they’re protesting a little too muxh. As if, in the latter part of the 1st century, there was still an oral tradition of John being the leader, and Jesus being the follower, and the gospel writers are bound and determined to prove that it’s the other way around. Because maybe there was a time when *Jesus* wasn’t sure who was the leader and who was the follower. Maybe Jesus himself was sitting in the darkness for a while.

But clearly there was a moment when Jesus saw the light. Maybe it was when he was baptized or maybe Matthew collapses the story and it came a bit later. But at some point, Jesus had a profound religious experience. He saw the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove. And a voice said, “This is my son…with whom I am well pleased.” The words have an echo of Isaiah 42, one of last week’s Servant Songs. God is pleased with Jesus, God delights in Jesus, God places the Spirit upon Jesus, and all of a sudden we’re back in Isaiah 42:1: “Here is my servant…in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him.” Jesus is being installed in the sacred office of the Servant of the Lord, and he sees the light and understands what’s happening.

That’s when Jesus seizes the initiative. You can only sit in the darkness for so long and then something – or Someone – tells you to get moving! Jesus saw the light and he knew that his calling was not to be the follower, but the leader. John was not the Messiah, *he* was! God had authorized Jesus to take matters into his own hands, and Jesus understood this. He was chosen by God, and empowered by the Spirit, to show others the way. Which is exactly what he proceeded to do.

First Jesus saw the light, then he *shared* the light. Having experienced God’s incredible love for him in that moment of enlightenment, he told others about the good news of God’s love. Because that’s what makes the news of God’s Kingdom *good* news: God loves us. God loves the whole world. He’s got the whole world in his hands, as we sang last week, and that includes the itsy, bitsy baby, and all of God’s children, and you, and me. John says, “God so loved *the world* that he gave his only begotten Son.” Not just “the good people” (whoever they are), not just this nation; the Kingdom of God has to do with *the whole world*, and with God’s *love* for the world. That’s the good news that Jesus shared. That’s the light that began to blaze away in the darkness of grief, and despair, and the resident bullies in Roman armor throwing their weight around. And it brought hope to the people who sat in the darkness. It brought new life to the people who were frozen in despair. It has been said that hope is trusting, beyond all evidence to the contrary, that great things lie ahead. One guy preaching good news isn’t a whole lot of evidence, but it’s not really about the evidence. Hope is not something that the eyes see but rather something that the heart feels. Indeed, St. Paul says that we hope for what we do *not* see. Hope is not, in the final analysis, the evidence that we can see around us but rather the faith that God has placed within us. And Jesus testified to that hope. Jesus shared that hope. And the people followed him out of the darkness of despair and into the light of a new day.

Which is to say that the people received the light *through* Jesus, and followed him. Jesus saw the light, Jesus shared the light and the people *received* the light. No longer frozen by despair or grief or betrayal or thoughts of “*if only* things had happened *this* way,” they received the light and they followed Jesus into a new day. Because, you see, with Jesus it wasn’t business as usual. Jesus broke with the darkness of the past and launched things in a new and hopeful direction. It wasn’t just the closed club of the Jews that this rabbi was going to minister to; he also reached out to the Gentiles. He left the Jewish town of Nazareth and made his home in the Gentile community of Capernaum. He left behind what was comfortable and familiar and reached out to people who’d never heard this message of one God, the Sovereign of all Creation, who loves the whole world and all the people in it.

And the crowds followed him. Jew and Gentile alike; they received the light and they followed him. Walking out of the darkness that had paralyzed them, they followed him.

Are you? Are we? Are we following him? Or are we sitting in the darkness? Are we breaking with the past, or letting it control us? Sometimes, there’s a peculiar comfort which comes with sitting in the dark. Sometimes the pain that you know is more comfortable than the possibility that you fear. And it is so very tempting to sit here in the dark, with the pain that we know and the people that we know, even as the number of people dwindles, and as the numbers dwindle, the pain deepens.

But there’s a world out there that needs to hear the good news. Beyond these walls, there’s a world out there. And the light which Jesus shared and that we at some point received, they need it. And we can offer it. I want you all to realize what a special community we have here within these walls. There is deep concern for one another in this place. There is care for one another in this place. And there is a certain fundamental health in this place that not every congregation has. Many congregations, hit with the kind of difficulties that you all have had over the years, have become fearful and suspicious and have turned on each other. But I don’t sense that kind of fear and suspicion and back-stabbing here. What I sense is love and concern and warmth. You know what? There are people beyond these walls who need that. They need that love and concern and warmth. They need that kind of community. And they need you to share it with them, they need you to invite them into this place of warmth, they need to hear about the Source of this warmth, who is Jesus.

Yes, they need to hear about Jesus. They need to be touched with the light that Jesus has shared with us and that Jesus has called us to share with others.

Which is why, when you see someone on a Sunday morning whom you don’t know, you need to greet that person. And when you find out that he or she is new here, you need to invite them back. And when you’re planning an event, you need to make sure that he or she – and everyone else – knows about it. If you’re following Jesus out of the darkness and into the light, you need to act like it. He has come into the darkness, He has opened-up the future, He is leading you and me and the Church and the whole world into a bright and *glorious* future, and that’s *good* news! No matter how dark things might sometimes feel, and no matter how much someone might exaggerate the darkness to scare you into either inaction or the wrong kind of action, God in Christ has opened up a glorious future. And it is *God’s* light that is shining through that opening; it is God’s light that is bidding us forward. All our hope on *Go*d is founded. It is the coming of *God’s* Kingdom, which embraces us all, that we anticipate.

And the Kingdom will come, just as Jesus promised. The great drama of history continues to unfold. In God’s own time, and in God’s own way, the Kingdom will come. Remember that car that was going to be ready someday before Jesus returns? While I was riding the bus, through the night, returning to Toronto, I glanced out the window and there was a sign, all lit-up, blazing away in the darkness, and it said, “Jesus is coming!” And I thought, “Oh goody, ‘cause I *really* need that car!!” And I laughed about the coincidence of it all, and I knew in that moment that things were going to work out. Because with the One whose Kingdom is certainly coming, all things are possible. Amen.