

Isaiah 9:1-4

The Righteous Reign of the Coming King

There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

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.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Matthew 4:12-23

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶the 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."

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for

people.”²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

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

Sermon: Is what we dislike stronger than what we love?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

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.

We read these words not too long ago – on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning. The lectionary brings this same passage to us again during the season of Epiphany. As we awake to the glory of God in our midst we are like a people walking in darkness on whom light has shined. We have seen a great light.

However, we are not the people that this passage was originally written about. The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali are the ones being written about here. Those are the lands that were in darkness. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the sons of Israel which later became two of the tribes. Their lands, along with the lands of Asher were the northernmost part of Israel.

Zebulun and Naphtali were the very first tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel deported by the Assyrians 700 years before Christ, and Isaiah calls these lands a place of darkness because by Isaiah’s time it was populated primarily by pagans. Since the Assyrians deported many of the Jews and imported refugees from other conquered territories, the few Jews remaining had difficulty holding onto the faith and traditions of their forefathers.

This dark land was the area to the west and north of the sea of Galilee, and indeed, much of this area had become known as Galilee of the Gentiles. By Jesus’ time many Jews had returned to this land, but it remained a territory surrounded by foreigners: Phoenicians, Syrians, the uninhabitable wastelands of Trachonitis, the independent Decapolis, and of course the Samaritans. It was a land with a dark history, and certainly surrounded by darkness.

In the southern part of these lands, near the border with Samaria, was a small town called Nazareth. We remember when Phillip came to Nathaniel saying ‘we have found the one Moses wrote about,’ Nathaniel’s response was ‘can anything good come from Nazareth?’ Nathaniel was from Bethsaida on the north shore of the sea of Galilee. He was already in the dark land and he thought Nazareth was a poor place, so Nazareth must be a dark place indeed.

Yet into this deep darkness a light has shined. Jesus begins his announcement of the Kingdom of Heaven at ground zero; at the very place where God’s covenant judgement had fallen seven centuries before.

When Jesus’ time came, he moved from Nazareth to Capernaum on the shore of the sea of Galilee and began to preach a message that sounds a lot like John’s message. ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

From this point Jesus began to call his disciples. In this morning’s scripture, we read of Simon Peter, and his brother Andrew whom Jesus is watching as they cast their nets. I imagine they must have been working the shallow waters closer to shore which means they would have been using hand nets, not the large trawling type nets they would use in deep water. I’ve watched fishermen using the circular hand nets in that part of the world and it’s quite a sight.

There's a real technique in throwing the net out in such a way that it spreads and covers a surprisingly large area, where the weighted edges sink down to trap whatever might be beneath.

Jesus watched Simon and Andrew work, and then called out to them. 'You're quite good at that. If you come and follow me I'll show you how to catch people instead of fish.' Immediately they left their nets and followed Jesus. There's a whole sermon about trust and faith in that one sentence. The two left their livelihoods, their security, their investments and followed Jesus.

Shortly afterwards, the three encountered James and John, who were in the boat with their father. They also followed Jesus, leaving their father behind with the boat.

Do you see what Jesus was doing? He was building a community, he was pulling together strangers. Over time Jesus brought together fishermen, a tax collector, various tradespeople and a zealot – kind of a professional agitator or demonstrator.

Jesus took this crew and with them traveled the area around the sea of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

In this dark place a light was shining; a light of peace, of deliverance, a light of hope. We see the writings of Isaiah being fulfilled; Jesus, Son of God, had brought the kingdom of heaven to earth. There was a bright light in the darkness, Jesus was unifying and uniting the people of Israel. Grand things were happening on a cosmic scale, and sandwiched in between these readings we have Paul trying to settle a dispute.

Jesus brings people together. But people – we instead choose to divide ourselves. The division in Corinth, not surprisingly, had to do with politics. Within 20 years of Jesus' death there were already different factions of Christianity. In this particular case, there were some who aligned themselves with Apollos, some with Peter, some with Paul, others with Jesus.

I'm impressed with Paul's response to this. Instead of feeling threatened that other shepherds were influencing his flock he asked 'Was I crucified? Where you baptized in my name?' He let the people know very clearly that nobody should be following him at all.

Elsewhere Paul does write that it would be good if people tried to live the way he did, but it wasn't because Paul thought he was great in himself; it was because Paul tried his best to follow Jesus' example. He exemplified Christ as Christ lived in and through him.

It's almost funny the way that Paul tries to distance himself from the squabbling Corinthian congregation. I'm glad I wasn't the one who baptized you, he said, I didn't create this competition. Oh, except for Crispus and Gaius, I did baptize them. Oh and there was that other guy, Stephanus, plus his family, and his servants. And you know, I don't really remember if there were more – but hey, I'm not a baptizer, I'm a proclaimer.

What I proclaim is Christ. Has Christ been divided? I don't think so, so if Christ is not divided then neither should you be. Jesus unites. Humans divide.

It's quite appropriate that this reading came up in the lectionary for this week. Earlier this week Gord and I were at a Presbytery meeting where an interesting motion came up. For anyone who may be new or not know much about the political structure of the Presbyterian church I'll give you a brief rundown. Each congregation is directed by a Session – a group of elected members. The minister doesn't run the church – imagine my consternation when I found that out. You'll remember that we had elections at the close of last year to replace some Session members who have retired and to add some new ones as well; next week we'll be ordaining and inducting them.

A couple of people from each congregational session are part of a regional group called a presbytery, and representatives from the congregation also make up the national assembly which meets once each year. The congregation and its session are the base unit of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. We don't have top down governance; we believe that we are equipped to discern the will of God best when we do it in community.

So, Gord and I were at a presbytery meeting earlier this week at which a motion was raised that arose from the human sexuality discussion currently before the church. This has to do with the official position of the church regarding same sex marriage, the ordination of homosexuals and related gender identity issues.

This particular debate began in earnest last year, and will continue for some time to come. Things move slowly in the church – this frustrates some people, but it also allows time to pray and meditate and hopefully avoid rash decisions. But, even though things move slowly, a decision will be made in the not too distant future, and that is what this motion at presbytery was about.

If the decision of the national church is to embrace the LGBTQ community, some congregations will see this as an unbiblical position and will feel that they can no longer be part of the wider church.

If the decision of the national church is to continue to define marriage as one man and one woman, some congregations will see this as going against Jesus' embracing of the marginalized and will feel that they can no longer be part of the wider church.

No matter what decision is made, there will be people who feel that the church does not represent their theology, and will feel that there is no place for them. The overture at presbytery was a recognition that over the next couple of years there will be some conflict and that rather than wait for the coming storm we ought to start talking now about how we will be able to get along afterwards. In the past when significant divisive issues arose the problems were made worse by continued fighting.

It's almost like a divorce in which the original disagreements get overshadowed by disputes over the kids, the house, the car, the retirement savings. The overture at presbytery tried to address this by asking for a discussion in which we set the ground rules so that if congregations feel they need to separate themselves from the wider church it doesn't turn into an argument that does even more damage to the church than the original disagreement.

It's a good idea. One congregation has seen conflict coming and has said 'let's see if we can do something to lessen the effects before it gets here.' I applaud the effort at the same time that I lament that it is necessary.

Jesus unites. Human beings divide. Since Cain struck down Abel we have disagreed about the proper way to serve God. We see it in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and we see it in today's church. A few sermons back I said that whenever we make a dividing line between ourselves and others, we usually find God on the other side of that line.

In our own private relationships we have similar issues. We have divisions. There are quarrels among us - that's natural when people are placed together - disagreements arise. But how do we resolve them? Perhaps we're fighting about the wrong things – Paul writes to the Corinthians you were not baptised in my name or Apollos, so why are you fighting?

Paul has a good point. The divisions that the Corinthian church were fighting about were not really there; nobody should have been following anyone but Jesus. The whole fight - and it must have been a significant fight for Phoebe to have sent people to involve Paul – was because people were missing the bigger picture. And what is the bigger picture?

Jesus came and died for us. That's the bigger picture. When I look at my own disagreements and difficulties, what are my issues? What are your issues? Are we angry because people don't think the way we do? They don't recognize our

value? People like others more than us, people don't give us what we feel we deserve, they withhold what is due to us, take advantage of us, gossip about and slander us.

But what is that compared to being unjustly accused, tortured, and killed? Whenever we feel the urge to reject somebody, to cut them off we need to remember that the man at the center of the biggest division in history spent his time and effort bringing people together, forming a community. Peter, don't kill them, put your sword away. Forgive them Father, they don't understand what they are doing.

With his last breaths Jesus invited a thief to be with him in paradise. To the very end, Jesus sought reconciliation, and then came back to continue building his community. Resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit, his promise to be among us as we pray.

As we look at the world around us, we see that we are in darkness. The politics of division are certainly evident south of the border, but we see it here too. Not far from here is a reserve. There is no marked border that I can see, but there is a clear division. I see it as I drive along the highway.

There is a division outside these doors. The people who come to this building through the week are quite different than the people who come here on Sunday. There is division among us. Doctrinal differences. Personal differences. Darkness abounds, in the world, and in our souls.

But oppression does not have the last word. The last word, along with the first word, belongs to God. That word is Jesus, the anointed one of God, the one who comes to unify, to reconcile, to heal.

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.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.