

Sermon Notes for 1/22/16 (Epiphany 3)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Isaiah 9:1-4

Theme: JOY IN THE LIGHT OF DELIVERANCE

The Point: By the coming of Jesus, God has brought light and joy to people who previously lived under oppression and contempt.

Introduction: In order to understand the text a bit better, we need to get a grip on the geography of Israel. Each of the twelve tribes (named for the sons of Jacob) received an allotment of land in Canaan when they occupied the territory under Joshua. It is actually a bit more complicated than that. Levi got no separate inheritance. Instead, the Levites (who served as priests) were given cities within each of the twelve regions. That would have brought the group down to eleven, except that Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh each received a chunk of land. In fact, Manasseh even did a bit better than that. Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh occupied the land east of the Jordan, the first part of the territory that was conquered. Today that is primarily what we know as the nation of Jordan.

Judah, Benjamin, Simeon, and Ephraim occupied the southern end of Israel. The middle part of the nation (which later became known as Samaria, after the exile) was owned by the other half tribe of Manasseh (so Manasseh got a double portion). That left the northern part of the nation, where the tribes of Dan, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and Naphtali lived. That northern area was the most "exposed" territory, through which various trade routes ran. It became known as Galilee and/or "Galilee of the Gentiles," since it would have been common to encounter Gentile traders and travelers in that area. It was where the Sea of Galilee was located, and of course Galilee was the place where Jesus' family settled upon their return from Egypt. They settled in Nazareth, but also in that region were located Tiberias, Cana, Capernaum, and Magdala. Galilee was the area where Jesus carried out most of His ministry – the only exceptions being the infrequent trips to Jerusalem for the Jewish feasts.

But I did not intend for this message to be simply a geography lesson. We have much more important matters to consider than the location of Zebulun and Naphtali. What is the prophet's point? Well, it has to do with the central sentence of the Old Testament lesson: "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." Though the land of Zebulun and Naphtali had been seen as a place of darkness, a place where heathen defiled the place, a place where the "good Jews" would not be seen, yet that is the place which receives most of Christ's attention and most of His ministry. Dramatic impact from an unexpected place – that defines much of what God is doing around the world.

Even though Jesus was born in Bethlehem (the little town down near Jerusalem in Judea), He was never known as "Jesus of Bethlehem." His parents settled in Nazareth, and there He was raised. He would always be "Jesus of Nazareth" (or, as the prophets put it, a "Nazarene"). When Nicodemus was trying to get the Sanhedrin to give due consideration to Jesus' claims, they said to him, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee." Their conclusion ran like this: No prophets or religious leaders could come from such a backward and irreligious location. Galilee was the backwater district as far as they were concerned. Their attitude brought a cloud over the Gospel.

It is a shame when the leaders of God's people act in ways that shame the Gospel. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., served on the U.S. Supreme Court for 30 years. His mind, wit and work earned him the unofficial title of "the greatest justice since John Marshall." At one point in his life, Justice Holmes explained his choice of a career by saying: "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers." (*Today In The Word*, June, 1988) I wonder how

many of the Jews of Jesus' day would have said much the same about the religious leaders that they knew in Jerusalem and around Israel.

Galilee was considered "out of bounds" by the Jewish leaders who inhabited Jerusalem and the temple. Nathanael expressed this very idea when he was told by Philip about Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Remember his words? "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" He had been on the same page as many of the leaders of Israel, who would miss the central point of Jesus' teaching. Nathanael, however, stayed on and became one of the Twelve and committed his life and his future to this erstwhile rabbi from Galilee. Paul acknowledged his own early misunderstanding this way: "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem." The fact that the twelve apostles were from Galilee aroused the derision of the leaders of the Jews from Jerusalem.

It would have been offensive to the bulk of the Jewish leadership, but this place of darkness saw the light. Remember how stirred up the leaders were when Jesus healed the blind man? They accused the poor man of heterodox teaching, of ignorance, of being a simpleton in the face of their greater knowledge. They were living in darkness. But the blind man could see – not only could he see with his physical eyes, but he could see with the eyes of the spirit as well. He confessed Jesus as the Messiah, something that would have been highly offensive to the religious leaders. In fact, that confession was so distasteful to them that they decided that anyone who confessed Jesus as Messiah would be thrown out of the synagogue. So the blind man who could see the truth was excluded from the fellowship of those who claimed they could see, but were blind to that truth.

God continues to act in ways that present the truth from places and in places that we would least expect it. Who would have imagined that basic biology would teach us the nature of the child in the womb, far more accurately than the justices of the Supreme Court? Who would have thought that from the pen of a former atheist we would receive such marvelous Christ-centered teaching as contained in the *Narnian Chronicles* or *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis? Would we have been able to predict 20 or 30 years ago that from the "Dark Continent" we would find such passionate and brilliant missionaries as we have seen in the West, even as represented among us in the presence of Pastor Francis Stephanos of Mekane Yesus? Who would have guessed that from the pen of a former utopian socialist we would find such powerful religious insights as those contained in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karmazov* or *The Idiot*?

In order to shed light in darkness, we need to be in synch with God and with His Servant Jesus. As Peter put it (being, as Luke aptly describes in Acts 4, filled with the Holy Spirit), "Salvation is found in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." That is what bothered Paul about the church in Corinth. He knew that some of them were exalting the name of Peter or Apollos or Paul himself as their mentors. He asked them the rhetorical questions, "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" They needed to get back to having Christ in the center of their confession and of their lives. Jesus must be lifted up!

Most of Jesus' early followers came out of Galilee. Many of them had made their living off the Sea of Galilee as fishermen. This would not have been the set of marketing people that any businessman would have chosen. Would you have picked twelve uneducated men who smelled like fish? But these were the people that God chose to be the primary witnesses to the resurrected Lord. Their witness would lay the foundations of the Christian Church, which has come to embrace some two billion of the earth's current inhabitants, with many being baptized on a daily basis as the Lord adds to our number all those who are being saved.

The prophet tells us just what it means that the 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.” Multiplying the nation – the number of the faithful increases as the Word of God captures heart after heart. At the same time, joy increases as well. Once the harvest has been gathered in, the farmers can rejoice – up until then, they may be reserved, cautious about what may happen, wary of too much hope, guarded in what they think they can expect. But once the grain is in the bin, then the rejoicing can begin! Time to celebrate, for sure!

But it is not a harvest of the fields – or even a pile of plunder from a recent battle – that causes the rejoicing that the prophet speaks of here. Instead, it is the breaking of the slavery and servitude that sin has brought into our lives. I was just talking the other day with a friend of ours who has been ministering to prisoners in recent years. He indicated how amazing it has been for him to hear the testimony of men whom God has claimed in that place of darkness and gloom. But the light of the Gospel shines brightly into lives where even the hope of forgiveness, freedom from guilt, and a new life has almost been squelched. Many prisoners have seen the light even from the darkness and loneliness of a prison cell. And you and I have seen the light shining in the face of God’s own Son.

Conclusion: By the coming of Jesus, God has brought light and joy to people who previously lived under oppression and contempt. And He is still in that same business, shining the light of His forgiveness into places where people are shackled by their sins. He shines the light of His joy into the lives of people who are going through the motions of living without the benefit of knowing real life. He shines the joy of His eternal life into the hearts of those who are set on living purely according to this world’s values and truths. Jesus comes to bring that light into our hearts as well. He puts a new song into your mouth, a song of praise to the One who breaks the darkness and who creates light at the very beginning of time and today as well. Let us give Him our praise and glory now and into all eternity, in Jesus’ precious name. AMEN!