

A GREAT LIGHT DAWNS

Matthew 4:12-25

Key verse: 4:16

"the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

I thank God for teaching us from Matthew's gospel each week. Last week we learned about Jesus' spiritual battle against temptation in the desert. Jesus said, "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt 4:4) Food gives us physical strength and energy to carry out our daily tasks. But it is very limited, expensive, and if we eat too much we become fat. In contrast, God's words are free and the more we feed on them the stronger and happier we become. They become in us like a spring of water welling up to eternal life. When we feed on every word that comes from the mouth of God through daily bible reading we can really experience the awesome presence and power of God.

In today's passage, Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee. Although Matthew presents Jesus' calling of the disciples right after his victory in the desert, it is likely the events from John 1:29-4:42 (Wedding at Cana, Nicodemus, Samaritan woman) happened in the interim (up to one year). So the disciples had already met and been with Jesus before. Jesus comes to Galilee to shine his great light on the people living in darkness. Jesus teaches about the good news of the kingdom of heaven, calls the disciples, and heals the sick. May this great light of Jesus dawn in our hearts today.

First, Jesus' messianic ministry was exact obedience to God (12-14).

Look at verse 12. "When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee." To many, John's imprisonment was a great tragedy. According to Matthew 14, it happened when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch (Herod the Great's son) for his sin of adultery, for he had taken his brother's wife. Herod got mad and imprisoned John in the hope of killing him. It seemed that the power of evil was in control and God's servant was suffering unfairly. However, when Jesus heard about this news, he recognized that it was God's signal for him to begin his public ministry. John had come as the forerunner for Christ. He came to make straight the path for the Lord. Now that he was no longer on center stage, it was time for Jesus to take over. Jesus recognized that God uses even bad events to accomplish his world salvation plan.

Returning to Galilee meant going into Herod's territory, for Herod the tetrarch ruled Galilee. Yet, Jesus was not intimidated by Herod's wickedness. Jesus marched straight into Galilee. Jesus had a spirit of conquest, believing that the kingdom of heaven must advance and the darkness of the world must recede before it. For this, Jesus gave his life to God, believing that nothing can hinder the Lord from advancing.

Look at verse 13. "Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the

lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali...." Nazareth was Jesus' hometown. He had spent his childhood and adolescence there in relative privacy among family and friends. Considering Jesus' humanity, it must have required a decision of faith and a struggle to leave Nazareth, overcoming his emotional attachments. In the past, he had probably celebrated the Passover with his mother and brothers, as we celebrate the New Year with our families in Japan. From now on, Jesus would celebrate the Passover with his disciples, often on the run. In the past, Jesus had probably enjoyed doing carpentry work and the peace and quiet of having personal time. From now on, he would be fully dedicated to God's holy mission until his life was consumed as a ransom sacrifice for sinners. Perhaps Jesus took one last glance at his home, his mother and his carpentry shop and thanked God for his life in Nazareth. But Jesus had no time to be sentimental. According to Luke 4:14-30, Jesus was rejected in his hometown before going to Capernaum. In any case, with a resolution to obey God's calling, Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum.

Look at verse 14. "...to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah...." Matthew continues to emphasize that Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled through Jesus. Yet, now Jesus is not guided merely by his parents or circumstances to obey God's word. Jesus made a conscious decision to obey God's word. Jesus lived by every word that came from the mouth of God. Jesus moved by God's word. Jesus worked according to God's word. Jesus located his ministry according to God's word. There may have been many practical reasons for Jesus to move to Capernaum; however, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' obedience to God's word. Jesus' messianic ministry was precisely his obedience to God.

Second, Jesus' great light shines in the darkness (15-17).

In verses 15-16, Matthew quotes Isaiah's prophecy. These verses say, "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." These verses teach us that God sent Jesus as a great light into the world of darkness. Let's think about why this is so.

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of Jacob's sons. They were not firstborn like Reuben, or favored by promises like Judah, or favored of beloved Rachel like Joseph. They were ordinary members of the clan. Later they became two of the tribes of Israel. After the conquest of Canaan, they received land in northern Palestine. This land is loosely referred to as Galilee. After the kingdom was divided, it was part of Northern Israel, which fell into idolatry. God called them to repent many times through the prophets. But they refused to listen to God's word. Finally, God punished them. The Assyrians invaded, conquered the land, and scattered its inhabitants. They resettled in Galilee with many foreigners (2 Ki 17). From that time, its pure Jewish identity was lost. Jews and Gentiles lived together. It became known as "Galilee of the Gentiles."

According to the historian Josephus, at the time of Jesus, Galilee contained about 300,000 inhabitants in over 200 cities. A favorable climate and fertile soil made it rich in agriculture. Major trade routes ran east and west, as well as north and south; thus it was

known as "the way to the sea along the Jordan." Having been influenced by Greek thought, Roman government, and Jewish law, there was a cultural blending that made it open to new ideas.

Verse 16 says the people there were living in darkness. It was spiritual darkness that comes from living without God. They did not know where they came from or where they were going. They had no identity, no direction, and no meaning of life. They had no hope. They were just existing in the flesh, toiling hard for three meals a day. Dissatisfied in their souls, they were prone to do dirty things in the darkness. When they confronted hardship, especially the wages of their sins, they blamed God. They were not seeking God. They did not deserve God's presence. Jesus' coming was the one-sided grace of God to them.

Japan may also be like Galilee. After the war, many foreigners began coming to Japan making it more and more multi-cultural. There was also a lot of technical advancement and Japan became a world leader in technology and education. On the surface, it seems Japan is doing very well. However, when we look closely we see that people are filled with darkness in their hearts. Some people work hard during the week and just sleep or drink on the weekends, wondering about the meaning of their lives. Wives rarely meet their husbands and many marriages are not very happy. Japan also became famous for having a high suicide rate because people can't meet societal expectations or find joy in living. Even though the country is very clean and has many convenient things which can't be found anywhere else in the world, people are living in darkness, rooted in godlessness. In addition to darkness, there is also the shadow of death. People live in fear of death with no hope of eternal life.

Look at verse 16 again. "...the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." The great light refers to Jesus. Jesus has power to drive away the darkness and shadow of death. Jesus is the like the rising sun that burns away the darkest darkness to reveal the bright dawn of a new day (Lk 1:78). Jesus reveals to us the love of God, the forgiveness of sins, the living hope of the kingdom of God, and the restoration of man's mission and fellowship with God. Jesus can enable anyone to live a most meaningful, joyful, and fruitful life for the glory of God.

How does Jesus do this? Look at verse 17. "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" This was the same message as that of John the Baptist. It is the timeless message that God has given us. In essence it means to turn away from sin and self to the living God. It is to admit that the life of sin is wrong and to cry out to God for help to live a new life. Jesus never overlooks a penitent cry. Jesus is waiting for us to come back to him. When we repent sincerely, Jesus gives us the kingdom of heaven.

The coming of the kingdom of heaven is good news to everyone who believes. The kingdom of heaven is equivalent to Jesus' reign. When Jesus reigns in our hearts, the kingdom of heaven comes within us. Jesus drives out the devil and the power of sin and death. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit, who works in us to make us like Jesus, bearing good

spiritual fruit. Galatians 5:22-23a says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Jesus' reign exalts God's greatness in us and also brings true happiness from deep within our soul.

Someday Jesus will reign over all creation as he now reigns in heaven. Jesus will turn over the kingdom to God the Father and God will be all in all (1Cor 15:24,28). The Apostle John saw a vision of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, the coming kingdom of heaven. In Revelation 21:22-27, he says, "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." Jesus' great light will shine until all darkness vanishes and the kingdom of heaven comes.

Third, Jesus calls the first disciples (18-22).

Look at verse 18. "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen." Peter and Andrew had already met Jesus according to John's gospel. For some reason, they had now returned to Galilee and resumed their ordinary jobs as fishermen to support their families. Jesus knew that the time was now right to call them to begin serving full time ministry with Jesus. Jesus saw them with great vision. Perhaps Jesus stood looking at them for several minutes, then said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (19). Through Jesus' words we can learn his mind and understand his vision for the kingdom, and for two fishermen.

As Jesus watched the fishermen casting and retrieving their nets, it reflected his vision of the kingdom. In Matthew 13:47-50, Jesus tells the parable of the net: The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. In the same way, God will catch all men in his net, even the most slippery among them. He will bring the righteous to his everlasting kingdom and throw the wicked into the fiery furnace. Jesus' vision was worldwide. Jesus' vision stretched across the generations and into eternity. Jesus saw the restoration of God's righteous reign over the lives of men and throughout the whole world, forever. As Jesus watched Peter and Andrew cast their nets and pull them in, he saw the whole world coming before God, person by person, generation by generation.

With this great vision in mind, Jesus called two fishermen who stood before him, Peter and Andrew. Jesus said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." At the moment, they could not grasp the magnitude and depth of what Jesus was talking about. But they were moved by the spirit of Jesus. They could taste the life that awaited them, a life of meaningful work that had true and everlasting glory. It was what their souls craved.

They were tired of working hard to catch fish, eating the fish to gain strength, using their strength to catch more fish, and so on, and so on. They found in Jesus hope of a dynamic new life that would bear everlasting fruit. Look at verse 20. "At once they left their nets and followed him." They had no second thought.

Jesus did not begin with religious professionals or people with high education. Jesus called ordinary fishermen. They knew how to work hard and faithfully. They knew how to adapt strategies and methods, according to the changing appetites and habits of fish. Most of all, they were humble enough to learn. So they could grow. They needed to learn the contents of the gospel and the kingdom vision. They needed to learn how to preach the gospel in a way that honored God and reached people. They needed to learn God's heart for those lost in darkness. They needed to learn and live by the holy standards of the kingdom. In essence, they needed to learn the character and spirit of Jesus until they became like Jesus. Jesus was promising to train them until they did so. Those who have received Jesus' glorious calling have a great promise from him. We must not only despair over ourselves. We must follow Jesus and learn from him until he makes us glorious servants of God for world mission.

Fourth, Jesus heals every disease and sickness (23-25).

Look at verse 23. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." Jesus resumed his preaching ministry. But now, he was accompanied by four men who had made commitments to follow him and learn from him. Jesus' heart was burning with God's vision and God's love for the lost. Jesus wanted to fill all of Galilee with the message of the kingdom. There were many people in Galilee, almost as many as all of Oita city. Jesus wanted to reach them all, preaching in their synagogues. The disciples' hearts pounded with excitement as they watched and learned. Jesus also healed the sick. In fact, Jesus healed "every disease and sickness among the people." There was nothing that Jesus could not heal.

Look at verse 24. "News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them." Jesus' healing ministry was fantastic. Jesus healed sinsick minds. Jesus healed tormented souls. Jesus healed afflicted bodies. We must believe this Jesus. Jesus can heal mental illnesses, cure cancer, and drive out demons of lust, laziness, vanity and so on. Jesus can make us whole and healthy members of his kingdom. Let's not rely only on medicine and healthy living. Let's depend on Jesus to heal us and others.

Look at verse 25. "Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him." These places are demographically diverse and geographically widespread. The people coming to Jesus were secular Jews, orthodox Jews, Greeks and other Gentiles. They came from every direction and province around Galilee. Galilee seemed to become the center of the world. It was because Jesus was there. Jesus' great light drove out darkness, drawing the sick and needy to him. People tasted God's love, saving grace, and healing.

Jesus' great light is shining today. Jesus drives out the darkness in our lives and nation and brings salvation and eternal life. Jesus wants to heal our physical and spiritual diseases. Let's follow him and let his light shine in and through us.