

Rev. Lisa Schrott
January 25, 2025
Isaiah 9:1-4 & Matthew 4: 12-17
Light & Shadows

For the season after Epiphany, beginning with the baptism of Jesus continuing through Transfiguration Sunday (otherwise known as Jazz Sunday at PCO), we are considering the imagery of water and light in scripture and how it speaks into our lives. In this time of the year when we have more hours of dusk and darkness than we do of light and when the water we so love in the summer is now of the less desired (at least for me) frozen variety, light and water have a different feel to them than they do in the summer months.

Our scripture this morning from the Gospel of Matthew comes shortly after Jesus' baptism by John. Jesus has just come from a time in the wilderness – a time of reflection and temptation – a time preparing him for ministry. And now that ministry will begin in earnest. We hear the initial steps this morning and next we will hear the rest of this passage as Jesus' calls disciples. Hear now these words from Matthew 4, verses 12-17, echoes of the prophet Isaiah.

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

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—
the 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.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

Reading our scripture this morning on the coldest week we have had in a long time, I wondered to myself if Jesus was a “snowbird” fleeing from Nazareth to make his home in Capernaum by the sea. Of course, we don't really know what time of the year it was for the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The Gospel of Matthew doesn't have too many seasonal references and those present mostly relate to festivals. However, as I looked at the geography, I realized that Jesus maybe was like a true Michigander, going up north the lake. Capernaum is about 50 miles north of Nazareth, on the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee, which is actually a freshwater lake. This sea is sometimes referred to in scripture as Lake Tiberias or Lake Gennesaret. When Jesus goes to the lakeshore, as he frequently does in the Gospels, it is to this body to which he retreats.

Even though we refer to him as Jesus of Nazareth, Capernaum and the surrounding areas become the home base for Jesus' ministry. Nazareth is in the lower Galilee region and the town was considered insignificant and irrelevant during Jesus' time. Many dismissed it as a backwater. Last week we stopped our reading in the Gospel of John before we got to the big dis on Nazareth. Jesus had called Andrew and Peter to be his disciples and the next day Jesus calls Philip to be a disciple. Philip invites his friend Nathanael, saying, "We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Now when I hear this in my head, I imagine a pretty snarky Nathanael, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

We don't hear that reference to Nazareth in Matthew's Gospel, so why does Matthew include this detail about Jesus leaving his hometown and venturing to Capernaum. This level of detail is especially noteworthy since in the passages about Jesus' baptism we simply hear that he is at the Jordan River and we have no details about where in the wilderness Jesus spends his 40 days of preparation for his ministry. And yet, the writer of the Gospel tells us: "Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled." He didn't leave Nazareth to work on his tan and enjoy the lake views, he left so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

The Gospel of Matthew is noted for passages speaking to "fulfillment" of words from the Hebrew scriptures. As New Testament scholar Raymond Brown notes, "In some ten to fourteen instances where Matthew cites the OT (Isaiah in eight of them), the scriptural passage is accompanied by the following formula (with slight variants): "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet who said." This is almost a Matthean peculiarity among the Synoptic Gospels." Brown notes that Jesus does not interpret these passages in Matthew's Gospel. He assumes those who hear the reference will understand the context. Brown also suggests it may have been a teaching tool to help the early Christian communities understand that "the whole of Jesus' life, down to the last detail, lay within God's foreordained plan."¹

So what do we make of Jesus' reference to the words we heard Steve read from the prophet Isaiah? "But 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."

Jesus language' is actually a bit more poetic: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles— the 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."

¹ Raymond Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Doubleday. 1997; p. 207

Scholars suggest that this reference refers to a difficult time in Hebrew history, roughly 760-730 BCE when there was significant geopolitical tension that affected the northern kingdom of Israel, particularly the areas where the tribes of Galilee, Zebulun, Naphtali resided. These areas were conquered by Assyria around 734–732 BCE. There was likewise tension in the southern kingdom of Judah during this time. Those in Judah were spared from the devastation of the Assyrian conquest by the ascension of King Hezekiah, from the line of King David.² “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.” Those in Judah had been spared through divine intervention. Their fear transformed into hope. Their despair transformed into relief.

Imagine how these words must have felt to the community to whom Matthew was writing. A community in roughly 80-90 CE, somewhere outside of Jerusalem itself, but near enough that the Jewish followers of Jesus were affected by the destruction of the great Temple in 70 C.E. by the Roman Empire. Many scholars place the community in Antioch in Syria, which had a sizable Jewish population, along with a large number of non-Jewish Gentiles who were attracted to the message and ministry of Jesus.

They might have been thinking we have been here before. We have walked in darkness. We have sat in the shadows of death. And here we are today. Facing a different empire. Yes, it is not Assyria this time, but we remember that fear; the potential for everything we know and love to be taken from us. Is that going to happen to us? Are we going to recede into the shadows of the community of nations? Is this movement of Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One, the son of David, this new king going to be vanquished by the empire of Rome?

We have been here before. And we here we are again. We remember the words the prophet spoke so long ago... “the 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.” To the people to whom Matthew was writing, this was a source of great hope. Matthew begins Jesus’ ministry with a reminder not to give into despair and futility. A reminder to look at what God has done and look ahead to what God will do. Look to the fulfillment of God’s vision for the world. Look inside yourself and ready yourself for God’s vision, the reign of heaven here on earth to be realized. Matthew tells us from that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

I suspect it was as hard for the people of Matthew’s community to imagine that the “reign of heaven” was coming near as it is for us day. There were plenty of “shadows of death” the people were facing. The siege of Jerusalem and the Temple destruction was apocalyptic and raised a number of theological issues for the people, just as the conquest of Israel by Assyria had. Is God still in control and faithful to God’s promises? How is the work of Jesus to

² John H. Hayes. Isaiah 9:1-14. Exegetical Perspective; Stephanie A. Paulsell. Pastoral Perspective. *Feasting on the Word*. Year A. Vol. 1 Westminster John Knox, 2010; pp 266-271.

continue when the light promised by Jesus keeps getting pushed into the dusty corners, barely visible above the rubble of life?

And Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” It was a personal message, must like that of John the Baptist. Get your house in order. This is not the time to run, nor the time to hide. This is the time to remain faithful. Because sometimes this is the hardest work we can do.

In a commentary this week, titled *When the World is Burning, Stay*, the Rev. Cameron Trimble writes of the work of St. Benedict of Nursia, during the sixth century as the Roman Empire disintegrated. She says, “St. Benedict did not try to save the empire. He also did not abandon the world. Instead, he gathered people into a way of life rooted in stability, shared labor, prayer, and care for the vulnerable. The monasteries that followed did not prevent collapse. But they preserved humanity within it. They became places where learning survived, where the poor were fed, where dignity was practiced when power had lost its moral compass. They did not do this by being loud or dominant. They did it by staying.”¹

Last week I shared my feelings and frustrations – the secondary suffering – I felt following the shooting of Renee Nicole Good. Those feelings have been amplified this week by the continuing violence in the streets of Minneapolis, including the shooting of an ICU nurse yesterday. It has been amplified by the rhetoric from government officials. This week I spent time in prayer for clergy colleagues, some from the Greater Lansing area, who were in Minneapolis putting their bodies on the line. And trying to stay warm.

For those of us who are “doers” or “fixers” it can be hard to not jump into the fray. So the Rev. Trimble’s words gave me some peace. There is a difference between remaining steadfast in God’s faithfulness and being avoidant of the very real pains of the world. Christ can call us to be a place of stability when the world is rushing by, to paraphrase the words of the Rule of Benedict in our words of preparation. Christ can call us to be the ones who are pillars of light, who are dedicated to praying for, and with, those on the frontlines; to be providing nurture and sustenance. To be ones who are trying to help make real the reign of heaven, by checking their own heart and impulses.

As the Rev. Trimble shares, “This is a different kind of courage than the kind we usually celebrate. It is the courage of remaining present when it would be easier to harden or disappear. It is the courage of tending life when destruction has momentum. Benedict called this *stability*: committing to a place, a people, and a way of living that resists chaos without mirroring it. Stability is not passivity. It is disciplined faithfulness. It is the refusal to let fear decide who we become.”³

³ Rev. Cameron Trimble. *When the World Is Burning, Stay*. <https://www.pilotingfaith.org/p/when-the-world-is-burning-stay>

Disciplined faithfulness. A refusal to let fear decide who we become. This is the way we usher in the “reign of heaven.” An empire befitting God’s value. And the church – our community here at PCO – and churches around the world can be both places of action and places of stability. Places where we recognize we are sent out into the world bring light into the shadows and places where people are invited into experience light in the dark and shadowy places of their lives. It is a both/and because our identity resides in Jesus Christ. We are marked by the waters of baptism, we are fed the bread of life and we drink from the cup of salvation. We are children of the covenant – the covenant that extends from days of Noah to the new covenant sealed in the blood of Christ.

Our identity in Christ shapes us in ways big and small. Or at least it should. It shapes the way we interact with each other. The way we interact with the world and those whom we have never met and are likely to never meet. It shapes how we spend our time and how we spend our money. It shapes whether we live with joy in our hearts, celebrating what we learn from those who differ from us, or whether we let our vision be clouded by bias, envy and fear. Whether we live in the shadows. Or in the light.

The 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. Right now we are surrounded by “the region and shadow of death.” So were those in days of Isaiah. So were those in days of the community to whom Matthew was writing. They had choices like we do. They could give in to the voice of the oppressors; they could acquiesce to the empire. Or they could refuse to sit in the shadows and instead allow the light to dawn, being an echo of the voice of God, calling for justice and standing up for those whose voices have been silenced. Sometimes this work is done in the streets with our bodies on the line. Sometimes it is done in our homes and schools and businesses and churches, as we are a refuge in the storm. A stable place where people can be recharged for the days ahead. To quote the Rev. Cameron Trimble: “Stability is not passivity. It is disciplined faithfulness. It is the refusal to let fear decide who we become.” It is the hard work of trusting in God to see the better angels in the world, rather than in the worst of humanity. Of working together to promote dignity for all people, especially when power loses its moral compass. It is the hard work of believing that light will dawn, even in the regions and shadows of death. May it be so. Amen.