

Holy Cross, Daggett and St. Mark, Wallace Lutheran Churches, Michigan

January 25, 2014

Isaiah 9:1-4

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan-- The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Lack of sunlight harms some people. Have you ever noticed this? Does it happen to you? I've heard people here say it. I have family members who are negatively affected by a lack of sunlight. I find myself missing the sun when it hasn't been around in a while. We even have a label for people who suffer from a lack of sunlight. We call it seasonal affective disorder or SAD for short. SAD is a form of depression which usually sets in during the short days of winter because we don't see the sun much.

The people Isaiah was writing to today understood what it was like to be without light. They felt like they were prisoners who were living in a land of darkness. Isaiah mentions two tribes specifically. He mentions the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were close to and around the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is in the northern part of the land of Israel. These tribes are about as far north as one can go and still be in the land of Israel.

The Sea of Galilee offered many opportunities for the tribes around it. It allowed people to earn a living by being fishermen. The people wouldn't need to worry about running short of water because you could get it from the lake. The water was nice, but this region was also a target. These two tribes were on the major road through the area. This meant any time an army tried to invade Israel it would attack the tribes Zebulun and Naphtali first before continuing south into the rest of Israel.

These attacks eventually took their toll on these two tribes. Some of the residents were taken captive and moved away from their homeland. Their captors brought other people who were non-Jews in to settle the land. These Gentiles brought shame and misery to the residents of northern Israel. The people became depressed because the light of the Lord was driven from their land. The light of the Lord was replaced with the darkness of gloom and unbelief.

Isaiah knows the sad, desperate and gloomy hearts of his listeners. This leads him to write, **"Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by**

the way of the sea, along the Jordan-- The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

Isaiah speaks words of comfort to these people who are depressed and saddened. He looks at them and he speaks directly to their hearts. He tells them a time is coming when their land will be flooded with the light of the Lord. How will the Lord's light flood their land? Matthew tells us in our gospel today, **"When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—"**

"To fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: '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.' Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."

Isaiah knew the people of Zebulun and Naphtali felt like God had forgotten them. He knew it felt like God had thrown them in a dark hole and didn't care about them. He knew they were filled with gloom and despair. However, Isaiah knew the tender and merciful heart of the Lord. He knew how badly it hurt the Lord that these people were dwelling in sorrow and despair. He knew God would not sit by and simply watch what was happening to them. He knew God would do something about it.

Isaiah looked into the future and saw a time when God himself would shine in these lands. Jesus would bring the message of the gospel to these lands which were covered in darkness and despair. He would drive away the gloom of despair and break the dawn of a new day. He would come to these lands which felt like they were forgotten by God and proclaim the good news of God's kingdom to them. He went through the towns healing diseases and sicknesses of the people.

These healings were only the beginning. Isaiah goes on to make a greater promise. **"Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan-- The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."**

"You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor."

Isaiah promises the people the rod and yoke which is burdening them. The things which were weighing them down and making their lives miserable will be thrown off of them.

What does Isaiah mean Jesus will throw off? Will he free them from foreign rulers? Will he provide a constant supply of food for the people? Will he do away with disease forever? He could have, but he won't do any of these things. He will do something better. He will come and throw off the despair of sin. He will free the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali from the crushing weight of guilt. He will drive away the gloomy clouds of unbelief with the brilliance of the forgiveness he won for them.

Isaiah promised these people who were dwelling in darkness and despair that God would provide rescue for them. He promised the brilliance of God's light would dawn on them. He spoke to them with a message of peace and hope. He spoke to drive away the fear and gloom of unbelief. He spoke to lift them out of the depths of despair. He spoke to relieve the distress which they could feel in their souls.

This leads me to think about us. How badly do we need God's light to dawn in our lives? How are you doing right now? Do you find yourself stuck in the gloomy fog of despair? Does it feel like you are trapped and think there is no way God could possibly love you? Do you remind yourself again and again of God's love for you, but it seems like nothing changes? Your heart stays troubled and you don't find any peace?

Is the guilt of a past sin bearing down and crushing your conscience? Does this guilt make you feel like God is punishing you for something you have done? Are you distressed by something you should have done but didn't? Are you distressed by something you said or didn't say when you had the chance? Do you get upset with yourself because you keep punishing someone else for something they apologized for doing long ago, but you can't let it go?

What would Isaiah say to us who are stuck in the gloomy darkness of despair? What would he say to us who can't find peace? What would he say to the conscience troubled and burned by guilt? What would he say to me? **"Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan—"**

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor."

Isaiah would remind us God's light dawns on us. Jesus came into this world to show each and every single one of us God's personal love for us. He came to show us God loves us no matter how horrible we think we are. Jesus came to show us God loves us no matter how burdened by guilt we feel. Jesus came to shine in the darkness of our despair. Jesus came to throw off the yoke of our sins. He came to bring us peace and security.

What should you do when you are hounded by guilt and despair? Fill yourself with the light of God's love. Give me a call. I will personally reassure you of God's love for you. Find another Christian you know and trust. Ask them to shine the light of God's love in your heart. Remember God won't punish you for your sins. He has already punished Jesus for them. Not you. These reminders will lead God's light to dawn in your heart. They will lead us to rejoice because Jesus' light drives away the gloom of sin. Amen.