

January 23, 2005
3rd Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 9:1-4
Pastor Ott

Light Shines Through Gloom

In Christ Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in the faith. It is very rare that we enjoy total darkness any more, isn't it? I look out my window at night and it is usually pretty bright because there is a yard light, a light at the front of the church is lighting it up, the yard light in our back yard is lighting it up and if those happen to be out, the light off in the distance from the city is glowing in the sky. The stars and the moon are there. Even at night there is light, and you can see.

One of the times I remember thinking "Boy, this is really dark" was when I was back in Minnesota, and we had a storm during the night and the power went out. So there goes all the yard lights. It was cloudy, so there goes all the stars and the moon. And it was loud from all the rain and the wind, and you could hear things coming down outside. And, of course, instead of going to the basement, what is it you want to do? You want to look outside and see what is coming down or if there is anything close that I should be going in the basement for. Well we looked out and it was so dark that we couldn't see a thing. So that night we ended up spending most of it in the basement. We had to wait and come out the next morning to see the light from the sun rising and see what had happened. On that day, it was Confirmation Sunday. We ended up calling off Confirmation and canceling church because there was no power, and we blew out a stained glass window with some straight-line winds that had come through. Some of our members had lost houses and barns. It was kind of a gloomy morning when the light rose then, huh?

That might be as close as you can get to some of the things that our text is really depicting today. When it talks about a light coming out of gloom; out of gloom and what seemed like defeat; out of gloom and what seemed like things that caused sorrow and depression. God says a light will come; a light that shines through the gloom. It shines out of darkness is what we are told this morning. And it is a light that shines and brings joy. It is not sunlight, it is not halogen light. It is nothing except the One who said *I am the Way, the Truth and the Light*. It is Jesus Christ that shines through the gloom of what we go through at times in life. That is what we are focusing on in our text this morning.

The land of Zebulun and Naphtali, *Galilee of the Gentiles*, that phrase that is used in our text. That might have sounded strange to you. Zebulun and Naphtali; you haven't named any of your kids that, have you? It was the name of two of Jacob's kids. It was two of the tribes of Israel. And their part of the Promised Land was the part way to the north, up by the Galilee. It became known as *Galilee of the Gentiles* in a land of darkness because Israel was often a pawn between the power to the south, Egypt, and the power to the north or to the west. Instead of going through the desert, they came along the north and then down the coast. So they came from the north. In this case, it

was the Assyrians. God had told King Ahaz, the king of Judah, that He would take care of them. They wouldn't be carried away by their enemies. But King Ahaz wasn't a believer. He didn't want to listen to God. He said, "I've got to take care of things myself. I can't just trust in God." So he made an alliance with the King of Assyria. The King of Assyria defeated his enemy for him, but then he kind of looked around the countryside and said, "You know, this is pretty nice. I think I am going to take some of this for myself." And in Zebulun and Naphtali to the north, in the kingdom of Israel, they carried off most of the people that lived there, the Israelites, and resettled them with people from Assyria, their own people. So it became known as *Galilee of the Gentiles*, because so many Gentiles had been settled there. It was also known as in the darkness because every time there were these kind of battles, the army would come through and destroy a lot of the land. They were the ones who bore the brunt of it right at the beginning. So you can understand why it says a light is going to shine in darkness. If you lived in *Galilee of the Gentiles* and were one of the ones left behind and you looked around and all you could see were reminders of the people that you used to know that were no longer there, would it feel like you were living in a type of darkness? Well, most certainly.

That is why it says this land that was once humbled; humbled in a way so it would see a great light. Even though the Lord had allowed them to go through all those difficulties, God promised them that in the midst of that gloom would come a light that would shine that would cause them to rejoice like men *dividing the plunder*. And we heard the fulfillment of that in our Gospel. That light that shines out of that gloom is Jesus Christ. And the gloom that Jesus Christ penetrates for you and I today is even worse than having all of our friends and relatives taken away and nothing left behind and things of this world. The gloom you and I live in is our sin.

We talked about it as we went through the baptismal service today, and as we read through that liturgy. Did you hear that? We are all born separated from God. We are all born with a deep need of baptism because we are all born in the darkness of sin and unbelief. We can't make a decision to come to Christ. We can't do anything to have Christ take that darkness away on our own. He has to come and act with us. Just like I am sure Katerra hasn't told you, "I would like steak and potatoes tonight." Just like she can't say that, we can't say to God, "I want to be a part of your family." We have none of that ability. We are lost and condemned creatures. Our darkness and gloom, our sin, all our hurts, our anxieties, our worries of life, they are all a result of sin. In the midst of all that, God comes with his Gospel and shines into our life and says, "*Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Light*".

If you ever feel like you are living in darkness and gloom, look at this light and it will chase it away because here you see My love for you. Here you see how I have taken away your sins. Here you hear My promises to be with you, to never forsake you, to give you everything you need for life. And in your baptism, where you were baptized into the robe of Christ's perfection, you can be assured that all of My promises are "yes" in Jesus Christ. That is how the light shines into our gloom. That is how the light comes into the darkness that is in our hearts and chases away the shades of that

darkness and gives us this love for God, this passion for God, this desire to know God better and to serve God in our daily life because He has chased away this kind of darkness.

Our text puts it pretty well, doesn't it? When God does this for us, when this light comes into our hearts, we rejoice like people rejoice at the harvest when the work is done and the harvest is gathered in and you can sit down and rejoice that it has been done and it has been blessed; as people rejoice when *dividing the plunder*. I don't think you and I have ever sat around and divided any plunder that we have rejoiced over. But I have a feeling that probably more than once or twice in our life we have rejoiced and had such a joy in our heart that we shouted out loud, that we got excited. Some people have such joy in this rejoicing that they will go to such lengths as painting their faces and taking their shirts off and having their chest painted colors. The kind of joy you will see at some sporting events, right? When the team wins, you see the rejoicing, the joy that is going on. God is telling us that kind of joy is ours and then some because of who Jesus Christ is. We have joy that goes beyond that. The problem is that you and I don't always live in that joy, do we? Do you ever find yourself walking through your daily life feeling like your shoulders are weighed down, that things are difficult, that things in life are heavy? It is almost as if we are acting as though Jesus lost to Satan; that he gave into the temptations, that we are still in our sins and there is no hope for us. We don't always live in this joy because you and I are sinners. And we get our vision distracted. We are busy with this, we are busy with that. We've got to do this, we've got to do that. And we get so worn down at times by all of those things we forget that we can rejoice as in the day of Midian's defeat; that we can rejoice because the battle had been won on our behalf.

That phrase, *the day of Midian's defeat*. Does that ring a bell for you? It didn't for me. I had to look it up. So don't feel bad. Midian, the sword of the Lord in Gideon; remember that? All those hundreds of thousands of people came, God sent them all back. And then with just 300, Gideon went and defeated the Midianites. Just 300 conquered and defeated God's enemy. The point was that God was showing them they didn't win the battle, but it's the Lord who gives the victory for the battle.

You and I at times go through life as though we have to win battles, and we forget that God has won the greatest battle for us when he had taken away our sins. You and I can live in the joy of that every day of our lives. But it is only going to happen when we focus on it. When we see our sin and our need for a Savior and we rejoice and we thrill that our sins have been washed away. That our God loves us and our God is with us. Our God doesn't ask us to paint our chests and write "Go God" on it. Our God asks us to live in joy in a different way; by serving Him; by getting to know Him better; by sharing Him as we live. That makes our joy known. And as you and I live with the confidence and the joy that is not dependent upon our outward circumstances, we will have the opportunity like Paul and Apollo and Cephas and all these other men, like Andrew and Philip, like James and John. We will have the opportunity to be *fishers of men* and share the good news that brought joy to us so that the light can shine through the gloom of the lives of others.