

Daylight Dawns on Dwellers in Darkness

In the name of him who bids us, “Follow me”; dear friends in Christ: Last week in the Gospel reading, we heard how John the Baptizer standing with his disciples saw Jesus approaching and identified him for his startled students as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” He had repeatedly taught them that his work of calling people to repentance and baptizing was to prepare them for the appearing of the Lord’s long promised Messiah. Now he was telling his disciples, “Well boys, there he is in the flesh. He’s the one I’ve been talking about.” So saying, John was effectively indicating that his work with them was done. Grade school’s over. Time to move up to the big league. That’s the guy you should look to as your teacher from now on.

Apparently they didn’t take the hint, because the next day when Jesus passed by again, John’s disciples were still with him. Who knows? Maybe they were reluctant to leave their beloved teacher. Maybe it was John’s widespread fame and his outrageous style – they didn’t want to give up that—what shall we call it? Celebrity by association? – to follow a total unknown. I think maybe it was that Jesus looked so utterly ordinary. When John spoke about the soon-to-be-revealed Messiah, they probably imagined someone tall, powerfully built, with Hollywood good looks, oozing charisma from every pore; but this guy John pointed to was just so *plain*. “Surely *he* can’t be the one. Maybe we heard John wrong.” So John points him out a second time and says, “Behold the Lamb of God!” And this time at least of couple of them catch on. They get up and go with Jesus.

Well now it’s several weeks later. John has been put in prison for having the temerity to “speak truth to power”. He denounced King Herod for living in adultery with his brother’s wife. Herod didn’t like the noise John was making about it, so he had his outspoken critic locked up; thus effectively ending John’s public ministry. Jesus takes this development as the cue to launch his own. But here’s what’s weird: John chose as his pulpit and place of work the desert immediately east of Judah. It was within a day’s walk of the capital, Jerusalem, which was the beating heart and center of the Jewish faith. He was an outsider to the entrenched religious establishment there; but he wanted his ministry close enough to attract a lot of attention – which it did. Jesus, on the other hand, begins his own ministry about as far away from that flagpole as he possibly can and still be within lands that had once been called Israel. He goes way up north, to the top end of the Sea of Galilee, to Capernaum and the surrounding area, to territories that had once been the Promised Land inheritance of the tribes of Zebulon and Naphtali—names which I’m guessing don’t come up very often in your routine conversation. They’re fairly obscure, and that’s kind of the point. They weren’t much mentioned in Jesus’ day either. Speaking both historically and spiritually, they were places with an exceptionally troubled and one might even say humiliating past – making them what you’d think would be the last place on earth for a guy like Jesus to begin his ministry.

But this is what we hear the prophet Isaiah foretelling in today’s Old Testament reading: how this particular region once brought so low and into contempt by the Lord would, in a future time, be richly blessed and made glorious in the Day of the Messiah’s appearing. We’ll get there in a bit, but first I’d like to let you know what caused this place – and its inhabitants – to fall into such disrepute in the first place.

In a word, it was unfaithfulness: unfaithfulness to the Lord that resulted in idolatry, gross sexual sins, and occult practices like fortune telling and necromancy – that is, attempting to

communicate with the spirits of the dead – all things very sharply condemned by the Lord as abominations. And mind you, it was Israelites doing these things, God's own people, whom he'd redeemed, cared for, and had given an inheritance in the Promised Land. Though the Lord repeatedly warned them to repent and return to him, the people of Zebulon and Naphtali refused. And so it was that the Lord's judgment fell on them. They were the first tribes to be taken captive in the Assyrian invasions that took place in the 8th century BC.

Think of the Assyrians as the Nazis of the time. They were known and greatly feared for their deliberate and savage cruelty. They would inflict unspeakably horrible tortures upon their captives. They wanted the nations they conquered to be in terror of them and so very carefully cultivated a reputation for excessive brutality. They also didn't want to have to conquer a place twice. So one of the things they did to make it less likely that a subject nation would rebel was to displace large numbers of the population. Some would be sold into slavery; but others would be systematically relocated to other corners of the Assyrian empire. Then they'd bring folks transplanted from other places to settle in the newly conquered land. The idea was to end up with a mixed population that couldn't work well together to organize a rebellion. The various groups would have different languages, religions, and cultures. They'd tend to be naturally suspicious of each other, and thus no single leader could unite them.

This is what happened to Zebulon and Naphtali. The majority of those who weren't slaughtered in the invasion or tortured to death just on general principle were sold into slavery or relocated. They only left behind the poorest, weakest, and least educated. And others were brought in to replace those who had been taken away. These people would naturally be Gentiles, non-Israelites, which from an Israelite point of view would mean they were unclean, nasty, unacceptable. Thus, overall, the lands of Zebulon and Naphtali, "Galilee of the Gentiles", became the prime example for the rest of Israel of how the Lord brings into dishonor those who dishonor him. It was meant to be a warning: don't do what they did or it will happen to you too. Isaiah lived to see it happen; but he also foresaw the day when the shame and reproach of that place would be overturned.

And the prophet describes in graphic images what would take place in that time to come. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined." We recognize this as one of the great themes of the Epiphany season: how in the teaching ministry of Jesus, as he reveals who he is and why he's come, people are brought from the darkness of spiritual blindness and ignorance into the light of his saving truth. But more is implied here. The word Isaiah uses for "deep darkness" in the passage is often a reference to the grave. That this light of the future age would also shine into tombs suggests the dead coming to life – as Jesus himself said of those who heard his words: "The time is coming and now is when those who are dead will hear the voice of the Son of Man, and those who hear will live." And so it is even today: when people who are dead in sin and trespass hear the Good News of Jesus' victory for us upon the cross, they receive the gift of life both in time and eternity.

And that, in turn, brings them out of shame, sadness, and deep mourning as the prophet goes on, "You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with the joy of the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil." By way of explanation, the multiplication of the nation refers to the increase in the number of its people. Before, the Lord made them small and insignificant. He decreased their numbers. He scattered them. In the time to come the population would swell to great numbers – and so we see multitudes coming out to follow Jesus; again, even as we do today as the Christian message goes out into all the world bringing people the joy of salvation and filling their hearts with gladness.

To describe this joy, the prophet uses two images: the first of which is familiar to us; the other not so much. A harvest celebration we can relate to: the work is done, the crops are safely stored, there's plenty of food and wine in the pantry, and there's money in our pockets. It's party time. We get that. Gladness when dividing the spoil is a concept we're not accustomed to. It refers to war. There's been a great battle. We've defeated the enemy. The field is ours. We may have captured their cities as well. The threat they posed to us is gone. And now all their stuff is ours. We've got their weapons, their food and supplies; we've got their livestock, and we've got their gold and jewelry, everything. Oh, and we'll sell the captives as slaves and cash in on that too. It sounds a bit rough to our modern ears; but that was life in the ancient world. And it was something to celebrate – especially considering that if things had turned out the other way in the war, the enemy would be doing all the rejoicing at our expense.

The main point in both these causes of celebration is that we didn't have to do anything. It was the Lord's work. The harvest we rejoice in is his. The war was fought by the Lord. He beat the enemy for us. And so it is in the ministry of Jesus on our behalf. He is the Lord of the harvest. And by his cross and passion he gains the victory for us over sin, death, and hell.

The final image the prophet uses speaks of freedom: "For the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have shattered as on the day of Midian." In the immediate context, Isaiah is referring to the cruel oppression the Assyrians laid on the lands of Zebulon and Naphtali. You see, when they conquered a place they didn't just take what they could and go. No, they stayed. And they demanded annual tribute. That is, you had to pay for the privilege of being their subjects: every year in gold, grain, wine, olive oil – whatever the land produced, so that most of your work went to serve them. They'd only leave enough for you to survive on so you could work for them again next year. So "the yoke of his burden" stands for slaving away for another like a draft animal. And the rod and staff indicate the sharp stick that would be used to goad or beat such animals to get them to work hard. Needless to say, life under such conditions would be miserable.

Spiritually speaking, however, it's a picture of life under the law – either as an idol-worshipping pagan trying to secure the favor of the false gods or as one who recognizes the Lord as the one true God but believes that the path to salvation is by keeping his commands and doing good deeds. It's essentially the same thing. It's a life of fear, uncertainty, and constant effort spent trying to attain an unreachable goal. All your work and effort goes for naught. It doesn't help you at all. It's bondage of the worst kind.

But Isaiah foresees the day when this oppression will be shattered "as on the day of Midian". It's a reference to what happened in the same places in the time of the judges, some four hundred years earlier. Then the Israelites had strayed from the Lord (a sad but constantly recurring theme in the book of Judges). In response, to turn the people back to himself, the Lord allowed the Midianites to invade the land. They were a group of nomadic desert tribes. For seven years, every spring they'd show up at about the time of the grain harvest. They'd spread out over the land like locusts, so great were their numbers, and take everything that had been harvested – that the Israelites had worked so hard for. Then they'd stay until fall, allowing their animals to fatten themselves on the pastures of Israel, and then they'd leave just after the fruit and grape harvests, having taken them as well. The problem was that there were so many of them. If the Israelites had attempted to fight back, they would have been easily overwhelmed. So they had to take it and live off what few scraps and crumbs the Midianites left behind

Well, the people finally figured out that it was on account of their unfaithfulness that this was happening, so they repented and cried out to the Lord. He sent them an unlikely deliverer

named Gideon. He was an absolute nobody: an unknown man from a tiny family of an insignificant clan. He wasn't much to look at either: small, slight; hardly a mighty warrior—and yet, that is what the Lord called him. Perhaps you remember the story. He sent messengers to call out an army to fight off the Midianites. About 30,000 men showed up. The enemy outnumbered them about eight to one. Not very promising prospects for victory. But the Lord said it was too many. “If you win at these odds, you'll give yourselves the credit.” So the Lord had Gideon reduce the size of his force to just 300 men. That made the odds 450 to 1 against them. It seemed hopeless. They'd stand no chance.

But that was the point: the Lord wanted them to know that the victory was his. Through dreams and rumors spread throughout the Midianite encampment, the Lord had caused a deep foreboding fear to come upon them. Then late one night he had Gideon and his tiny force spread out and sneak up close to their camp. At a prearrange signal, they all made a loud noise of breaking pottery, lit their torches, blew their horns, and shouted. The enemy awoke in a panic thinking they were surrounded. In the confusion and chaos that ensued, they began slaughtering each other. In the morning, 120 thousand of them lay dead and the rest were running in terror for their lives being chased by just 300 men. The victory was total. The scourge of Midian was shattered. And all the Lord needed to carry the day was a little light, a little noise, and an army of 300.

And looking ahead across the centuries, Isaiah foresaw when it would happen again in the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali; but this time with an army of just one – just one man bringing light to those in darkness, joy to those in gloomy sadness, and freedom to the oppressed – in the person, the teaching, and saving work of Jesus. And with all this understood, we now see that it makes perfect sense for Jesus to begin his ministry here. First, because the light of Christ is seen most clearly by those who realize that they are in the dark. And second, because as we heard, the message of Jesus is to repent and turn to him “for the kingdom of God is at hand.” That is to say, those whom Christ wants to raise up must first be brought low. Those he means to exalt must first be humbled: shown their sin, their shame, and their dishonor, as well as their inability to save themselves. Only then can they repent and receive the salvation he has earned for them by his victory on the cross.

It happened in Zebulun and Naphtali as Jesus began his ministry, and it happens here among us as the light of Christ continues to bring us out of darkness, disgrace, and oppression by his ongoing work among us through his Church. May his light ever shine on us, in us, and through us to the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!