

January 22, 2017
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Matthew 4:12-23
The Rev. Carenda Baker

“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.”

We hear today from Matthew’s gospel the account of the launching of Jesus’ ministry. Context is everything for launching something new. So let’s recap the beginning of Matthew chapter 4 to help us understand what Jesus has been up to just prior to today’s gospel lesson.

Do you know where Jesus has been? He has been in the wilderness, getting his priorities sorted out. The tempter, the Adversary has tried to persuade Jesus to think of his own calling in terms of vast throngs and vistas – taking Jesus up to a high pinnacle to look out over “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor”, promising Jesus that everything he sees – all of it - can be his.

The Spirit helps Jesus sort out these attractive options of the tempter, and Jesus says to the tempter, “No thank you”. Instead, Jesus chooses a very different lens, a very different view, a very different scale to design and carry out his mission. He turns away from the vast, rich panoramas offered by the tempter, leaves the wilderness, and returns to the small world of the lakeside, walks down the beach and says to two men who are fishing there, “Follow me”. And then a little further on, to two other brothers who are fishing, “Follow me”. Jesus opts for beginning his ministry in the immediate context of his own life and experience.

This is an important point to pay attention to. The Lord is not necessarily calling for you, me or anyone else to speak to large crowds, vast multitudes singlehandedly, so that the whole world might hear and respond to the good news. That would simply be immobilizing, which Jesus seemed to recognize for himself in the wilderness. That which the tempter offered Jesus – fame and notoriety - would have ensured that nothing lasting would ever happen!

No, instead Jesus goes local, goes to the place where the people have been sitting in deep darkness and in the shadow of death. Galilee – that is where the light and healing and truth of God will shine forth. That is what Jesus is about, and it is that work – shining God’s light of healing, truth, and love – to which Jesus invites Peter and Andrew

by saying, “Follow me. We’re going fishing for people”. And to the Zebedee brothers, “Follow me. There is light that needs to be shared. We’re going fishing for people.”

And so these four hardworking men take up with Jesus, the light of God, the One come to pierce the darkness of sin, illusion, sickness, separation and alienation – they follow Jesus and begin to learn what it means to walk and live with the light of God, what it means to walk in the light of God, hour by hour, day by day, month by month.

Those four fishermen learned to walk in the light as they watched and heard Jesus teaching, preaching, and healing. They learned to walk in the light through spending lots of time with Jesus – swapping stories, sharing hopes and dreams, fears and doubts, talking about their families, praying together, studying and discussing the Scriptures, breaking bread together, walking the roads around Galilee in each other’s company.

The disciples didn’t know it, but in Jesus’ company they were being transformed into light bearers themselves. Because you see, we can’t help but take on and start to reflect the qualities of the ones with whom we spend the most time. Hang around those who exude goodness, love, truth, and light and eventually the goodness, love, truth and light will begin to shine through you. Hang around those bent on deception, contempt, greed and self-promotion and the shadows of darkness are bound to deepen around you.

Former Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori reflects about this passage: “Jesus goes to Capernaum by the sea to bring light into the lives of those who dwell in darkness. He calls those four brothers to follow him, to share in his work of lighting the world. Our baptism means the same thing – time to join the body of light-bringers, giving life to the world. When Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”, it doesn’t mean to be sad or depressed. It’s an invitation to turn around and face the light. We’re meant to be like sunflowers, facing the sun all day long, continually turning to face it directly so they can take full advantage of the sunlight. During the night they turn some more, so that at the first rays of dawn, they’re oriented directly toward the rising sun. We’re supposed to do the same, leaning toward the source of life, depending on the Holy One at work in our midst, and when the night seems darkest, to keep turning in expectation of the dawn.

We are invited to become transformers of light, and to invite others to the light, so that the light of Jesus can heal and light up the world.” (*Gathering at God’s Table*).

Folk singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer has a song on her newest album called "Lean in toward the Light". Listen to these words of the bridge between the verses: *"The shadows of this world will say, 'There's no hope, why try, anyway?' But every kindness large or slight shifts the balance toward the light. Lean in toward the light. Oh lean in toward the light."*

Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to be in relationship with the ordinary people all around them. It is in our ordinary everyday relationships where we can most easily practice being light bearers, as we lean in toward the light of Christ.

So my fellow light-bearers, here is a simple spiritual exercise to practice for the next few weeks. Think of one person with whom you are in some sort of relationship. The relationship may bring you joy, sorrow, frustration, or hope. Whatever the nature of your relationship, take some moments each day to pray for this person, and believe that God is using *YOU* to make a difference in the life of the one for whom you are praying. Trust that the light of Christ is at work in you to shine on another.

Spiritual author and teacher Henri Nouwen writes: "In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love and light that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds." The world needs people of peace, people of gentle courage, and people of quiet immovable wisdom. The world needs people who will constantly, persistently, and faithfully lean in toward the light of Christ in order to reflect it to others. "Follow me", says Jesus. You. Now. I need *YOU*. We've got light to share.

Amen.