

Epiphany 3

Isaiah 9:1-4

January 22/23, 2023

Have you ever felt stuck in life? You look at the problem that you are facing, and you just can't see a way out. There once was a captain on a ship that was traveling in the ocean. One night he saw this light that was coming toward in and so he signaled to the light with a code of flashing lights. He said to the light that it needed to change course 10 degrees to the East. The light flashed back to the captain that he needed to change his course 10 degrees to the West. The captain on the ship seemed kind of annoyed with the response. The captain flashed back and said that I am a captain in the Navy, and this is an order: *"I am a captain in the United States Navy and I order you to change your course."*

The reply that came back was simple: *"I am a seaman, and I am telling you to change your course."* The captain was infuriated now. *"I am a captain, and I will not change my course, and that's an order!"* The seaman replied: *"I am a lighthouse, and I can't change my course."*

Have you ever felt like your life was going down a certain road, a certain direction, and you just can't see a way to change its direction? Have you ever just seemed like your life was stuck? Maybe that is how the children of Israel felt in our text this morning. Isaiah writes: **"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."** What a mess the Israelites had made of the promised land they had inherited in the Old Testament. They had turned it from the Lord's precious possession into a filthy place filled with fraudulent business practices and worship of idols. As judgment God gave possession of the land to foreign, idol worshipping kings, and many of the Israelites were deported into foreign captivity. There they may be tortured. They would be some of the more ruthless people who walked the face of the earth. Centuries later a small remnant was allowed to return to this land of darkness. But the once dazzling glory of Israel had been lost.

Despite the darkness, God would keep his promise, as Isaiah 9:1 explains: **"In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan."** Zebulun and Naphtali were territories on the northern edge of Israel. This was not a good place to be when Israel's enemies would attack from the north, which often happened. It was a land that continually was scarred by fighting and destruction. In the process, it became a melting pot of people from all kinds of background. Some good and some not so good. This area would become known as Galilee. You get a glimpse of how the people felt about this area, when Nathaniel said: **"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"** (Nazareth was a city located in Galilee.)

If you lived at the time of Jesus, Galilee would not be the place that you would choose for the Savior to come from. Yet, it was the perfect place for the Savior to grow up and begin his ministry. Neither foreign nations or the mess created by the Israelites would keep God from sending the Savior to that area. It was a land that was filled with the darkness of sin. Because of that, it was the perfect place for the Savior to come from. It was because of the darkness of sin that Jesus needed to come to this world. **"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."** The part of the promised land, often was the most obliterated land by foreign nations, would become richly blessed. As Matthew reports in his Gospel, it became the hub of Jesus' saving activity. **"When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew 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."**

Yes, the children of Israel had messed up. They deserved to be punished. Yet, they get a Savior. How about you? What have you messed up? Perhaps, you let someone down. Perhaps, you made some financial decisions that weren't all that wise. Maybe you haven't spent enough time with your family, and it fills you with guilt. Maybe, it is something that you have done or said, that just seems to be crushing you. Then these words of God are meant for you as well. **"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."** Your Savior, who came to this earth, made his base of operations in the dark place that needed his light the most. That light came to shine in the darkness of sin in people's hearts, that includes you.

God wanted his people to trust him. **“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.”** Midian was one of those enemies who continually attacked Israel. Every time the Israelites were to harvest a crop, the Midianites attacked and took it. Things got so bad that people left their homes and lived in caves. They were desperate. But God heard their cries. God would destroy that yoke decisively. He would use a man named Gideon. The Midianites numbered a 135,000 men in their army. Gideon had 32,000. But God wanted the Israelites to see that it would be God who would rescue them. God had a plan. His plan didn’t include having an army of 32,000. He had a plan that he would defeat their enemy by using 300 men.

That’s the kind of God we have. We have a God who gives his people victory. That’s the kind of victory God won for us as he died on the cross and rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. There was no way that we could defeat sin and death. So, God did it for us. When that darkness sounds us and makes us feel trapped, Jesus reminds us of the light he brought to this world – **“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.”**

That’s what God does: He forgives and loves. He comes to sinners who have made a mess in their lives and cleans it all up. Every day he continues to keep shining his love into our lives. May God help us to see that light every day of our lives. Amen.