

Let's talk about Zebulun and Naphtali. They are mentioned twice in Matthew 4. Our reading from Isaiah mentions them too. I would wager that most of you here today don't know much about Zebulun and Naphtali, which is ok, there isn't a ton to know, they are not very prominent figures in the Bible. But they are prominent in the Bible readings today, so let's talk about Zebulun and Naphtali. These two obscure names have a pretty important message.

Zebulun and Naphtali were two sons of Jacob (so, Abraham was their grandfather) whose families grew into two of the tribes of Israel. When the Israelites took over the Promised Land the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali inherited two chunks of land on the far North East boarder of Israel. The land God has promised Abraham and his descendants was a narrow strip of land boarded on two sides by water, the Mediterranean on the West, and the Sea of Galilee, Jordan River, and Dead Sea on the East. Israel's North-Eastern boarder was the Sea of Galilee which was the lake that Matthew references, where the city of Capernaum was located.

The people of Zebulun and Naphtali had a problem. For hundreds of years they had been living in darkness.

Living on the far North-Eastern boarder of Israel was all fine and good, until the bad guys came. It would be the equivalent of living in Washington D.C. if the United States were ever invaded. If bad people are picking first strike targets in America, D.C. is going to be right at the top of the list. That was Zebulun and Naphtali. If bad guys were going to attack Israel, the first strike for many would have been Zebulun and Naphtali.

And the bad guys did come. Throughout Israelite history the boarder tribes suffered the brunt of the unbelieving and aggressive nations around them. The people of Zebulun and Naphtali grew up with the violent, terrifying darkness of war as a regular part of their lives. And when Israel was finally and completely defeated by the super power Assyria, they attacked from the North, right down the throats of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali.

The kicker for Zebulun and Naphtali... when the shadow of death came, it was their own fault.

When they were conquering the Promised Land, God had been very clear with them: **Be very careful to love the LORD your God. But if you turn away [from God and his commands] and ally yourselves with the survivors [of the nations God is driving out before you] and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD God has given you.**

God was very clear. "Love me more than anything else in this world and nothing out there will be able to hurt you. But if you love that stuff out there it is going to be a trap for you. It is going to destroy you."

God was very clear, but they didn't listen. And because they didn't listen, the darkness came.

The first shadows of darkness started long before the Assyrians stepped foot on Israelite soil. The darkness started the day the Israelites started loving the things around them more than they loved their God.

It was a sneaky darkness. It didn't just show up one day and say, "Hey, forget about your God. Love me more." God had predicted it would be a trap, a snare –something that would come on them unexpectedly if they stopped prioritizing God.

The darkness came disguised. The darkness came veiled in good things – like prosperity.

God told the Israelites they were supposed to completely drive out the godless nations from their land, not let a single one of them remain. Instead, they kept some from those nations as neighbors and as slaves. Why? Because they wanted to provide for their families. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness they were finally going to be able to give their families a home – all of the things they were missing out on as they wandered in the desert, they could finally have them. And neighbors and slaves... they could help with that. Slaves and neighbors could help their families prosper. God had said drive them out completely, but what, really, is the harm in keeping a few of them around? How much trouble could a few friendly neighbors and slaves really cause? And the darkness began its creep.

The darkness came in veiled in good things like love and family.

They didn't just keep some of those people around as neighbors and slaves, they married them. They started families with them. After all, what is the worst that could happen? So a few of our sons marry a few pretty unbelievers, what's the big deal? Only God had told them not to marry them – and the darkness crept further still.

Friends, they ignored God's very clear warning and they didn't even make it a single generation before their self-made trap sprang shut. At the beginning of the book of Judges we are told, **"After that whole generation (the first to conquer the Holy Land) had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel... They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger."**

One generation of failure to prioritize God brought darkness that would smother the land for centuries.

In his anger God sent bad guys to try and shake them awake, to make them realize how much they needed their God. When they still ignored him, he finally sent Assyria to wipe them out. And receiving the brunt of God's anger, on the front lines: Zebulun and Naphtali.

They lived in a darkness of their own making.

There is a strong word of warning for us in the history of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Darkness isn't always a big, scary, obvious things. Like, if the Devil is going to bring darkness into your life he isn't just going to show up one day with red skin, horns, and a pitchfork, "You really should love God less than you do." The darkness is much more subtle than that.

The darkness is anything that clouds, hides, distracts, or obscures Jesus and his truth.

Zebulun and Naphtali would be the first to tell us that darkness can come in some really appealing and non-threatening clothing.

It could be your career – a good desire to provide for your family (like they had), a good desire to use the gifts and abilities God has given you at a job you love – a career that maybe slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, begins to cloud Jesus, to reprioritize your life. So you don't have time to read your Bible on a daily basis; so you forget to pray as often as you used to; so you are so busy doing good stuff at work you miss a weekly worship here or there, what's the harm in that?

It could be your family – a good desire to love your spouse, to raise your kids well, giving them opportunities to grow and flourish – family that maybe slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, begins to cloud Jesus, and reprioritize your life. So you are so busy doing life that family devotions kind of fall by the wayside; all sports happen on the weekends these days, so for a few months you miss church most Sundays, what's really the big deal? What's the harm in that?

What's the big deal? What's the harm in that? Zebulun and Naphtali thought the same thing.

The devil is really, really good at this friends, at introducing the darkness without us even noticing it. Anything that clouds, hides, obscures, distracts you from having a laser-like focus on Jesus for you and your family is darkness.

And darkness for us, this kind of darkness, doesn't just mean bad guys invading – certainly we experience the wages of sin in many different ways in life, but the real darkness would be if God said, "Fine, have it your way. You think all that stuff is more important than me. You want that stuff more than me. Have it your way. I'm done with you."

This was the darkness Isaiah was talking about, because we chase things other than God, **"They will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness...**

**... NEVERTHELESS."** What an amazing word. Zebulun and Naphtali lived in a darkness of their own making, **"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 nations, by the Way of the Sea... the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."**

Zebulun and Naphtali living in a darkness of their own creation, would see a sunrise – God promised it through Isaiah.

And then, 800 years after Isaiah made the promise, that man named Jesus set up shop in Capernaum – **teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.**

On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light dawned.

Jesus starts his ministry here. Jesus in baptized, spends 40 days being tempted by the devil in the wilderness, and then he heads to Capernaum, to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali to being his work – this is the first place Jesus does his preaching, teaching, and healing – right here, in the place that so often felt the first pain of God's anger and the suffocating shadow of darkness, they are the first to feel the joy of God's forgiving love, and see the light.

Talk about poetic beauty.

For the Israelites the suffocating cloud of the shadow of death crept into their land from here, in Zebulun and Naphtali. In his poetic love, the dawn of grace would start here in the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.

It starts here, but it doesn't stop here. The sunrise started here in the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, right here in the preaching, teaching, and healing the suffocating shadow of death begins to roll back; the sunrise started there, but it didn't stop there. Jesus came so that not just the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, but all of Israel could feel the warming, healing love of God.

And the beautiful truth for us: Jesus didn't just come for Zebulun and Naphtali, he didn't just come for Israel. He came for you and for me.

All of the darkness of our own making doesn't stand a chance when Jesus shows up. All of our fears, all of our worries, all of our selfishness, all of the pain we have cause others, all of the pain others cause us, all of our misplaced priorities, all our mistakes and failures, it is a weighty and heavy and suffocating darkness that surrounds us, but it doesn't stand a chance when Jesus shows up.

Just ask the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Think about what Jesus showing up meant to those people living in Capernaum – what it would be like to have one man come to town and fix everything that's broken – every disease, every sickness, just gone. A man who wouldn't just heal diseases but would preach and teach good news about a God who should have felt nothing but anger, but instead, as he had promised through Isaiah, was going to forgive their sins and love them and heal them. After being on the front lines, the first to feel the anger of God as one army after another invaded their land over the centuries, they are on the front lines, the first to feel the love of God when Jesus shows up.

That same Jesus shows up today for you and for me. He shows up through his word here in the Bible any time any day, just pull your phone out of your pocket and you have access to the healing light and love of your Jesus. He shows up through the mouth of your pastors, through the encouragement of fellow believers. Jesus shows up here today to do what Isaiah promised he would do - to

drive away the darkness; to give you comfort and encouragement now, to remind you that the God who should have felt nothing but anger, instead brings the promises of light, love, and forgiveness to you.

Zebulun and Naphtali, who knew they had so much to teach us? For we, who like them, feel the weight of the darkness of our own making, a light has dawned. For Zebulun and Naphtali and us, Jesus shows up, and everything is better. Amen.