

## **God's New Promise**

January 26, 2020

### **Isaiah 9: 2-4**

*<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. <sup>4</sup> For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

### **Matthew 4: 18-23**

*<sup>18</sup> As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. <sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*



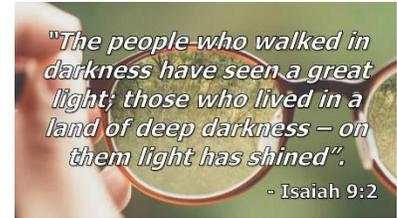
Let us pray...

As we begin this third week of the "Seeing 20/20 in 2020" sermon series we continue to link in the Old and New Testaments as they reveal how the new light of the world develops God's promises and calls us to live the Christian faith in our own lives and out in the world. Just as a review, the four Old Testament covenants defined God's relationship with the chosen people, Israel. As the relationship was defined to a greater and greater degree, the circle of who was in and who was out also became more clearly defined. By the dawning of the birth of Jesus, the circle had become tightly drawn in. For the Jewish people, it was good to clearly understand how they were set apart by God. It was a necessary step to accomplish before opening the circle to the wider world.

We see Jesus doing the same thing with his immediate disciples – he did not send them out into the world right away. Jesus carefully taught and modeled what it looked like to be a disciple and to live out God's love in the world. Only when they understood what these things meant were ready to go out to preach and heal. As the disciples went out into the world, there was a progression to their where or to whom they went. Like with Jesus, they first went to their Jewish brothers and sisters. It was only after ministering to their own did they expand the circle, going to the Gentiles and eventually to the ends of the earth.

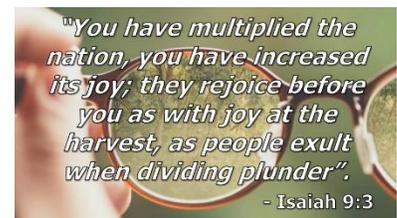
As we begin this morning, I invite you to turn to Isaiah 9. Here we see Isaiah reminding the people of the benefits of living into the Old Testament covenants established by God. But Isaiah is also speaking of a time yet to come. He begins our passage today with a promise of a new era, of a day when God will once again smile upon the people of Israel.

In verse two he writes, *"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"*.



The light will not dawn for hundreds of years, but the vision of this day sets up hope for a people still living in the darkness of exile and oppression. Looking into that preferred future, Isaiah reminds them of the positives experienced when they choose to live faithfully with the Lord their God.

In verse three he writes, *"You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder"*. There is hope in these words – the



nation will be re-established and blessed by their God. Isaiah continues in the last verse from our passage to speak of the yoke being removed. For the people of Isaiah's time, they would see this burden or yoke as the oppression laid upon them by the foreign power that has been ruling over them.

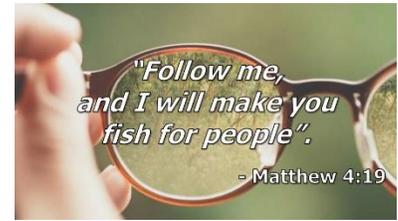
Reading these words roughly 2,700 years after they were written, we can understand a wider application of these promises of God. When we, in Jesus' name, offer relief from the yoke of people's burdens today or when we share how Jesus can take away the oppression that people are facing today, we can bring new life to these words from Isaiah. When we read these words as applicable for us today, we see how Isaiah is leaning into the opening wider of God's love. Yes, in the historical context, those living in darkness are the Israelites during the time of exile in Babylon. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians though, we can read the promise of breaking the yokes of oppression as applicable to

people struggling this very day. We can share God's promise as revealed by Isaiah as God's new promise for those now living in a place of darkness. The great light of Jesus Christ continues to look out beyond the chosen people that Isaiah was writing to in 700 BC, offering freedom from all that binds people today.



Now I invite you to turn with me to Matthew 4, where we find our second passage for this morning. Chapter 4 begins with the temptation of Jesus. After a period of prayer and fasting out in the wilderness, Satan comes to test Jesus. Each worldly temptation is met by Jesus with the truth found in scripture. In the end, Satan departs defeated and the angels tend to Jesus. Jesus has passed the test and is ready to begin his public ministry. He understands that there will be challenges ahead and that his strength to overcome these will not come from within himself. The strength will come only through his relationship with God. Before we get to today's passage that starts on verse eighteen, please note that in verses fifteen and sixteen Jesus pauses for a brief time and reflects on his role in fulfilling the prophecy from Isaiah 9 that we began with today. As his earthly ministry begins, Jesus goes forth with a simple proclamation: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*". The light has dawned. The covenants, particularly the David covenant, have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. After reflecting on Isaiah 9, Jesus sets forth along the sea of Galilee and calls his first disciples. The call story that we have in Matthew and Mark is much simpler than the call story that we find in Luke's gospel. And all three of these call stories are very different than the call story that we find in John's gospel.

As we turn to verse eighteen, Jesus is walking along the seashore. He sees two brothers casting a net into the sea. Simply saying to them, *"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people"* they leave all behind and follow Jesus as he works his way along the seashore. A short time later he sees James and John, sitting with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He calls them using this or a similar request and they too immediately follow, leaving their father and all else behind. According to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus' ministry has just begun as he calls Andrew and Peter, James and John. There have been no miracles, no astonishing teaching sessions, no crowds yet follow Jesus. And using just this simple statement, four men leave all behind to follow Jesus. They leave everything. These four men begin to follow a rabbi with almost no credibility and with almost no credentials. It seems very hard to understand.



To help you understand how radical the call and response to follow was, I want to share a little bit from author Rob Bell about how becoming a disciple of a rabbi would normally occur. Rob writes,



*At the age of six, children would begin to learn the Torah. This training was called "Bat cipher." From eight to ten they would memorize the Torah by heart, from Genesis through Deuteronomy. By the end of bat cipher, most kids would go and learn their family trade, but the best of the best would advance to the next level. The ones with the most natural ability would then memorize through Malachi. After this, the best of the best of the best would then apply to a rabbi to become his disciple.*

Wrap your head around that for a second. Only the best of the best of the best who could memorize from Genesis 1:1 through Malachi 4:6 would be able to apply to follow. That means they would have memorized just over 23,000 verses. And then the real work would begin. Bell goes on to explain, writing,

*A disciple does not just want to know what his rabbi knows, but he wants to be like his rabbi, and do what his rabbi does. Different rabbis had different sets of interpretations, which were called a Rabbi's "yoke". So, you would then apply to the rabbi and the rabbi would grill you. The rabbi wanted to know if this kid can do what I can do, if he can he spread my yoke. But after the rabbi grills you, he might say, 'You love God and know the Torah', but then he would say, 'Go learn your family business'.*

We assume that Jesus had never met Andrew, Peter, James, or John before that day along the seashore. Just as they responded to his call because of something deep inside of themselves that connected with this relatively unknown rabbi, Jesus was being led by the Spirit in calling the first disciples. Bell continues on with what would normally happen if accepted by a regular rabbi. He writes,

*If the rabbi thought this kid has what it takes, that he is the best of the best of the best, the rabbi would then say, 'Come follow me'. You would then leave your family, friends, and your synagogue and village and you would devote your entire life to being like your rabbi, learning to do what your rabbi does. This is what it means to be a disciple.*

This 'come and follow' process sounds like the process that Jesus' disciples would go through as they became Jesus' disciples. They left all behind and devoted their entire lives to following their rabbi, Jesus Christ. Scholars believe these four men were good, devout Jews. They would belong to the inner circle that all devout Jews belonged to. But they did not go through the process that all other Jews went through to follow a rabbi. To help us understand why these four men responded as they did, let me share these last words from Rob Bell:

*All this has huge implications to Jesus. In the gospels, we see Jesus calling Peter and Andrew to come and follow him. If they are fishermen, then they are not following another rabbi. That means that they are not the best of the best of the best. The Bible says, they dropped their nets and followed after Jesus. Of course they would have done that. Because in those days, rabbis were the most honored and respected people. Picture this: Jesus, a rabbi, is walking along the beach and says, 'Come and follow me'. What he is really saying is: 'You can do what I can do, you can be like me'.*

With Andrew and Peter, James and John following, Jesus heads off into ministry. In verse 23 we read, "*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people*". Imagine what was going through the minds of these four men as they worked over in their own minds what it meant by Jesus calling them: You can do what I can do, you can be like me. Think about that for a moment: You can do what I can do, you can be like me. My friends, this is what Jesus says to you and me.



As the church evolves and grows, part of the struggle in the church becomes how much of the Jewish laws and traditions to hold onto as absolutes for the newly developing Christian faith. Almost all of the men who would lead the early church were Jewish. That means that they had grown up memorizing the Torah and more if they were above average. Within their small circle, Jewish culture and society had changed very little since the days of the prophets. Israel was still an overwhelmingly agricultural society ruled most directly by the religious leaders who resided in the temple and synagogues. Yes, the Romans were the current overlord, but they allowed the Jews a lot of independence in practicing their religion and governing themselves accordingly. The context for reading the scriptures had not changed very much by the dawn of the first century. To that point, the scriptures were written by Jews for Jews still living basically within the same Jewish culture and society. So, when the early church leaders were challenged with widening the circle, it created a lot of tension and angst within the church. But before we get to that, let me give you a modern example.

Just last Sunday in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade confirmation, we ventured into an area of unease and tension. The side notes in our Bible gave information on the phylacteries and prayer shawls that many Jewish men wore. Phylacteries are small boxes that are strapped to the forehead or arm. Inside the boxes are pieces of scripture. Prayer shawls were used, among other things, to gather tears during times of deep prayer. Both of these items are still in use today. Here are two pictures recently taken that show what a phylactery and prayer shawl look like today.



I asked the question: how do we, as Christians, visibly represent our faith in a public way in our day and age? One suggested the crosses that many believers wear. Another suggested some people wear a shirt or other article of clothing with something church or faith related printed on it. I then suggested tattoos. Today many people get a tattoo with a cross or scripture passage or some other religious imagery. And then one parent raised a very insightful line of questioning. She shared that she thought the Bible spoke against tattoos. I responded that, yes it does. I added that it also speaks against piercing oneself. That drew a curious look from her. I explained that the law that she was thinking of was like many of the other laws that evolved through the early history of the Israelite people - these were laws that at least in part were aimed at clearly defining who the people of God were.

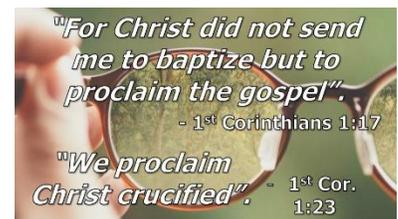
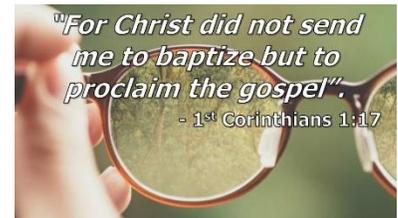
I went on to explain that many of the pagan tribes that lived around the Israelites let blood as a gift to their gods, mutilated their bodies, and created scars in the images of their gods. To a certain extent, the prohibitions against tattoos and piercings were intended to prevent the Israelites from becoming like the pagan people around them. To a certain extent these laws were about keeping the circle drawn tight and clearly defining the parameters of belonging.



As I move into the last section of today's message, I invite you to turn with me to 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, chapter 1. By this time, roughly 50 AD, the church has grown and expanded throughout most of the known world at the time.

Paul went to Corinth and established a church there just a few years before writing this letter. As his letter begins, he turns to addressing the divisions in the church. Corinth was predominantly a Gentile city and was a worldly place that was influenced by many religions and philosophies. The church in Corinth, much like the churches in all the other cities outside of Israel, was made up mostly of Gentiles. They would not have the same steeping in the Torah and other Hebrew scriptures that was common in churches in Israel. In addressing the division in the church in Corinth and in addressing what parts of the Jewish faith must encompass the newly forming church, Paul always fell back into what he saw as the core message. We read that core message in verse seventeen. Read along with me in your Bible.

Verse seventeen in this translation states, *"For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel"*. For Paul, the simple message of the gospel took priority over all else. A few verses later, in verse 23, Paul defines this simple gospel, writing that *"we proclaim Christ crucified"*. The core of the gospel for Paul was that Jesus died to save us from our sins and to give us the gift of life eternal. This was and is one of the core tenants that all churches through the ages have held fast to: Jesus died to save you and me.



The church in Corinth had gotten bogged down in a debate over a side issue. Some were arguing for following or belonging to Paul and others for following Apollos. To connect back to the idea of following a rabbi, they were arguing

over whose yoke to assume. In the midst of this debate, some even claimed to belong to Jesus Christ. Because of the side debate, they were failing to be the church to the world outside and, worse yet, to be the church to one another.

Dare I say this sounds familiar? Whenever the focus of the church shifts from the primary task of proclaiming Jesus as the Savior of the world, we have ceased to walk fully in the light. Whenever the gospel is not front and center and primary, we have lost a little of our steadfast grip on God's new promise that we find in the new covenant established through Jesus Christ.



The struggle in the church in Corinth is not an isolated incident. Down through the ages, the church has wrestled with its understanding and interpretation and application of the Bible. As the church grew in Corinth, the early church leaders came to see that the circle has widened. Gentiles are becoming believers. Their challenge would be to decide what must be held and what must be allowed to fall away. To require believers from outside the Jewish tradition to hold to all that the Jews had believed and followed was eventually deemed not necessary. Over and over the early church leaders fell back to two core questions. The first was whether or not it furthered the core mission of sharing the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ. The second was whether or not it led to a deepening of how one lived out the gospel as a disciple of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The light that was to dawn that Isaiah spoke of became the man who said to the first disciples, "*Come and follow me*". Responding to Jesus' call, they would follow their rabbi for three years, learning to do what Jesus did. Then they would take his yoke upon themselves, going forth after Jesus' death and resurrection to teach others how to follow Jesus. As I close this morning, I want to share Paul's words to the believers in the church in Corinth. These words not only echo the call of Andrew, Peter, James, John, and all the other disciples, they also echo our call as disciples of Jesus Christ. I will be reading verses 26 through 30. Please follow along in your Bible.

*<sup>26</sup> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*

As we go forth, seeking to be the community of faith that God calls us to be, may we go forth clinging to the promise: Jesus died to save you and me. May that be what we proclaim to a world that needs to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. May it be so. Amen and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) Grow. What growth or new understandings is God prompting in you?
- 2) Pray. Where is God challenging you? Pray for wisdom and guidance.
- 3) Serve. We all serve someone – God or self. How can you better serve God within the church and out in the community?