

A Epiphany 3 1.26.20

Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

Focus Statement: The Kingdom of God is for all

I heard on the news this week that last Monday was what is known as Blue Monday, the most depressing day of the year. Normally the third Monday of January, this date is apparently not arbitrary. A brief search through that great bastion of all absolute facts, the Google, produced a formula for how this date is selected, taking into account the following factors: "weather conditions, debt level (the difference between debt accumulated and our ability to pay), time since Christmas, time since failing our new year's resolutions, low motivational levels and feeling of a need to take action."

Further Google research uncovered, probably to no surprise, that there is actually no scientific proof of January 20th as the most depressing day of the year. In fact, apparently the whole thing started in 2005 as a publicity stunt by a UK travel agency to get people to book vacations. Fun fact: the same guy who invented Blue Monday was also sponsored by an ice cream company to come up with a formula to calculate the happiest day of the year, sometime in mid-June. But, while Blue Monday may be nothing more than an unsuccessful marketing campaign, it is true that winter is hard because we humans need light. Our bodies are attuned to the rhythms of the sun and when, like in winter, our actual schedules do not line up with the sun's schedule, the result can be a chemical imbalance in our brains that leads to increased fatigue and depression.

We need light. We need light because we are by and large a visual species. Our preference for light is not a modern pop-psychology excuse to stay in bed and watch Netflix in the

winter, it is an evolutionary trait honed from the time when the things that hid in the dark could, and probably wanted to, eat us. A time like that of the writer of Isaiah.

Isaiah was talking metaphorically about the people walking in darkness, but it wouldn't have been a hard metaphor for his audience to understand because the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali were pretty metaphorically dark places. If you're up on your Old Testament Bible stories or your Andrew Lloyd Weber musicals, you may recognize Zebulun and Naphtali as two of the twelve tribes of Israel. According to scripture, after the conquest of the Promised Land, Joshua allotted land to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Naphtali was given the northeastern most corner, north of the sea of Galilee, and Zebulun the land directly below it, what after the time of King David became the northern kingdom of Israel. This location meant when the Assyrian Empire started to strengthen and expand in the 8th century BCE, Zebulun and Naphtali were the first line of defense, and the first, therefore, to fall. And Isaiah, if you remember, was a prophet sent to get the southern kingdom to change their ways before what happened to the northern kingdom would happen to them. Which means these people who were in "anguish" and "contempt," these were a people conquered people, people without safety or security, people without hope. This was what it meant to be people who "lived in a land of deep darkness."

And to the southern kingdom of Isaiah's time, these people sort of had this coming. There was great rivalry between the northern and southern kingdoms of what had been Israel, and the south saw the north's fall as proof that their wicked ways had caused God to turn God's back on them.

It is these dark and weary people whom Isaiah announced had “seen a great light.” This light comes not from the foreign powers, nor from the people’s efforts, this light comes from the God who had never left them, dark and alone as things had seemed. Because that is one of the cruel characteristics of darkness, when you are in the midst of it you often cannot see what is there alongside you, that potential for light that is just about to break through.

This is the power of the Epiphany season. Epiphany, this season of light, reminds us that even in the midst of darkness, when we cannot see our way through, the light of Christ is with us, just waiting for the right moment of illumination. The light of Christ is not a switch we can turn on; it is not waiting for our action. Rather, it is there beside us, moving in the darkness, though we cannot sense it, until finally we are drawn into recognition of the in-breaking presence of the kingdom of God.

This in-breaking presence is what the writer of Matthew was referring to in quoting Isaiah in our Gospel reading for this morning. We are only just a few verses out from the adult Jesus’ first appearance on the scene following the bold declarations of John the Baptist, yet already things seem to have taken a turn. Verse twelve informs us that John, who had built such a following in announcing Jesus’ arrival as the one “who will baptize...with the Holy Spirit and fire,” had been arrested by Herod and is in prison.

In the face of this setback, Jesus “withdrew [pause]... He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.” This withdrawal may seem like retreat at first, which is why the writer of Matthew reminded us of the words of the prophet Isaiah. Because “from that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

Repentance, this demand by Jesus to repent, feels loaded because we’re used to hearing it from one another. Calls to repent often come from those with very specific definitions of who is in need of it and what such repentance should look like. But remember the one who is doing the calling here is not a person, it is the Word made flesh. The one who is making this call to repentance is Jesus. And repentance to Jesus is restoration to relationship. Jesus, who the writer of Matthew takes pains to remind us, is God with us, is always the actor, always the subject of any sentence, the one whom is driving the transformation of us. To repent there for is not to transform ourselves but to be transformed. To be drawn in to the light of Christ that is already breaking through the horizon.

Like John, Jesus suggests in this passage that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The Greek word here is *engidzo*, which has this sense of impending to it, like the first hints of grey in the dark of the eastern night sky, like the shifts in the soil of springtime before the crocuses burst forth from the snow. *Engidzo* says that this thing is coming already and though we cannot yet see it, like a freight train it cannot be stopped.

This thing that is coming is the kingdom of heaven, a new state of affairs in which all are “united in the same mind and the same purpose.” This invitation to repent is not so that we can receive the benefit of this kingdom, for that, remember, is already ours. That is the action that is the grace and the gift of Christ Jesus. Rather, this invitation to repent is so we can be about the work of spreading this kingdom, of sharing this gift with others. We see this call to repentance lived out in the rest of this morning’s Gospel reading when from his withdrawn location in Capernaum, Jesus called Simon and Andrew, who immediately left their nets and followed Jesus as he “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.” The lectionary would stop us here, but if we go on two more verses we find this great light dawning further and further as Jesus’ “fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics”—read here all those whom society had cast aside as not worth the effort—“and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”

Dear friends in Christ, do not believe the lie that the darkness wins. For the pattern of dawn in night, the pattern of winter to spring, the movement of Advent to Epiphany, reminds us again and again, that Christ is with us, though we cannot yet see it. But the in-breaking of the kingdom is at hand. Thanks be to God. Amen.