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 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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 Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27:1-7, Matthew 4:12-23
 "Light in the Dark"

Jesus comes to the shore of Galilee and calls four fishermen to follow him. They drop their nets and follow him.

This is the kind of story parents warn their college-age and young adult children about. You don't give up everything to follow a guru. You don't follow someone just because they ask you to. We know the dangers.

And yet this happens in the gospel text and right under the eye of Zebedee, the father of James and John. Imagine this father losing two deck hands there and then to a stranger on the shore. Something compelling pulls his sons to Jesus.

Sometimes a new light convinces us to make a vocational switch as these fishermen did in this passage.

When I was a journalist I wasn't sure if journalism was in my future so I spent a weekend discerning this and reading Matthew I heard personally the call by Jesus to follow him, to drop my net (my typewriter) and follow him into a full-time call in the ministry. I still have a typewriter in the guise of a computer and use it just as much nowadays to write sermons, lesson plans, prayers and notes. I'm still in the news business and happily it's all good. Had I seen the light? I think I had.

It was akin to the light spoken of in the passage today. The light is introduced in a bold, lighted billboard earlier in the passage which happens to be the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus hears that John has been arrested. He leaves Nazareth and goes to the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali and fulfills what was said by the Hebrew prophet Isaiah:

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
 on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the
 Gentiles –
 the people who sat in darkness
 have seen a great light,
 and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
 light has dawned."

Different gospels have different versions of this period in Jesus' ministry. In Matthew it's clear to all around that Jesus is this light and that's what the disciples respond to. Had they heard stories of Jesus' coming and his connection with Isaiah's words? Had they heard Jesus say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near?" They probably had and more (in Luke Jesus performs what looks like a fishing miracle) and in the context of the day it was excellent and safe enough for them to follow him.

It's amazing that Jesus' ministry begins this way. The precipitating event is John's arrest which precipitates the Isaiah quote.

During our recent trip to England we stayed with friends Kevin and Rose who took us sightseeing to castles built during the Norman invasions of England in the 700s CE. I left the group and walked down a dimly lit stone stairway to a dark and dank prison cell. It was so dark at the bottom that I couldn't see the prison floor. I'd forgotten the warning at the beginning of our tour not to step into the cell because it had collected about two inches of rain water and so I stepped into the puddle and quickly jumped out. It was freezing. There was one tiny slit of a window that let in a little light from the overcast day but not enough to see at first.

If a prisoner was confined to this cell he or she would be deadly sick in days and probably dead shortly thereafter. Back in the day I'm sure they had ways of preventing the water from entering the tiny window. Nevertheless, it was dark, dank and foreboding.

The Isaiah statement in our passage today speaks into the context of John's arrest: "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled."

While the Isaiah oracle was spoken during the sacking of Israel by the Assyrians in the 900s BCE it is repeated here after Jesus hears about John's arrest. Times were harsh in Isaiah's day and times are harsh in Jesus' day. John is sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death. Shortly afterwards he would die at the hands of Herod who satisfies the wiles of his vindictive wife.

Since John died shortly afterwards, and these words of Matthew were written 40 years after Jesus' death, one assumes that Jesus becomes light for all unjustly imprisoned and by extension to all who sit in darkness and the shadow of death whatever these might be.

Isn't it fascinating that Jesus' ministry in Matthew begins with a strong statement on the presence of darkness. I looked up "darkness" on-line and found an amazing prevalence of darkness in all its forms. Edward Abbey's statement is intriguing: "You can't study the darkness by flooding it with light."

The biblical text makes it quite plain that there is darkness in the land and that human beings are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death. Benedictine monk, David Steindl-Rast, writes that "in its enthusiasm for the divine light, Christian theology has not always done justice to the divine darkness...On the level of religious doctrine; it's a God that is totally purged of anything that we call dark."

What is "divine darkness?" It's the opposite of non-divine darkness where one is stuck in the dark. Divine darkness is a place of healing and because we are in the dark we can see the light when it comes. A person in recovery from drugs and alcohol told me on Friday that in divine darkness one learns from the darkness.

When God is totally purged of anything that we call dark," writes Steindl-Rast, "...we try to live up to the standards of a God that is purely light and we can't handle the darkness within us. And because we can't handle it, we suppress it. But the more we suppress it, the more it leads its own life, because it's not integrated. Before we know it, we are in serious trouble."

"The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." Jesus comes to the darkness of our stresses, strains, pains, depressions, confinements and losses.

In coming he says: "Turn around, for the realm of heaven has come near." Turn from darkness; turn from alienation; turn from whatever is dragging you down towards heaven's dawning light.

A Christian friend off-campus asked me: "What is Christ's light in my friend's cancer?" It's a difficult question and I didn't want to sound glib. I said, "You are that light. The light may not come in physical healing but it comes in the love and support of those alongside the person with cancer. It's spiritual support which touches heart, mind and body. In our prayers, it is God's comfort, strength and healing for the person. We cannot define the healing that comes to a person. People like to know that we are praying for them."

I love the combination of light and dawn in the Isaiah statement because it connotes a fresh start. Jesus invites those in personal darkness and in the shadow of death and those caught in corporate darkness whose off-shoots are prison, debt, unethical practices done to others and done to us, unwholesome relationships, etc., to enter his bright, fresh, dawning world.

The fishermen who followed Jesus probably wanted a fresh start. They wanted to be with the community of the Beloved and that's why we are here today. They discerned something genuinely authentic and followed their deeper selves. We also follow of our deeper selves and so we follow Jesus.

We know that Jesus lightens our path, shines in our hearts, brings light to our dark places and turns our dark nights of death and loss into the dawn of a new day. We know that Jesus is light in the dark and we gratefully follow his lighted way. Amen.