

Inauguration of the Good News: Light Overcomes Darkness
January 22, 2017
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Isaiah 9:1-4:

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. 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. 3 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. 4 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 4:12-23:

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “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.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

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. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

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.

What a week! And I don't even mean the rain we've had! I mean the week starting with the celebration of Martin Luther King on Monday, and then Friday's inauguration of our new president, Donald Trump, and the Women's March held throughout the country and actually throughout the world yesterday – apparently I there were 670 women's marches throughout the world, even in places such as Antarctica and Macao and Riyadh, Beirut, Iceland and Iraq, over 5 million attending worldwide to stand for equality and well-being of all people. Some sources call the Women's Marches “peace marches” and others “protests.” In any case, that's a lot of

coming together in one week. A lot of ceremonies, a lot of people showing up to affirm their values and live out their hopes and dreams.

What is important to remember today is that as Christians, we come together, with differing political positions and viewpoints, to remember that God is bigger than it all. We come together to celebrate that God is in charge. We come together to find comfort in that. Leaders come and go, and Creator God is still the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. We must remember that we all really deep down want the same things: safety for our children and our children's children.

There are differing approaches to how to achieve this. We must communicate with each other and open our hearts and minds to create a community of understanding even among our differences and disagreements. We are called not to deny the reality of darkness, but to repent from the power of darkness over our lives.

I know words like "sin" and "repent" can conjure up a negative and distasteful impression of fire-and-brimstone messages of ages past. Last week, the line we focused on in the Scripture was John the Baptist's exclamation, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," which introduced Jesus to the world in the book of John. We spoke about how sin can be defined as turning away from God. In today's gospel passage of Matthew, Jesus repeats the exact words that John the Baptist had been preaching prior to Jesus' arrival, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near." John the Baptist said it, Jesus repeated it.

This is Jesus' inaugural statement in Matthew, and he proclaims this message of John the Baptist, who has just been arrested, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near." When we think of sin as turning away from God, and repent, then, as turning to God, perhaps we can revise our outdated impressions and see the value in the message of sin and repentance. If we think of God as love in the form of light, then sin is turning away from the light, living in darkness, and repentance is turning towards the light, living in brightness. (demonstrate with hands).

Now the fact that John has been arrested for making these claims could be for many a sign to lay low, back off, and not ruffle the status quo, and certainly not proclaim the message of repentance and God's kingdom if it is going to lead to one's arrest. But Jesus is not like that. Jesus takes the injustice of John's arrest as a call to action, a call to get going, a call to stand up and preach and gather partners, and to continue declaring the message of repentance, even though John faces the death penalty for doing so and will eventually be beheaded. It's almost as if this incident of John's arrest fires Jesus up.

In the passage, Jesus doesn't go straight to the center of wealth and power in Jerusalem to start his ministry; instead, he heads to Galilee, a beautiful and fertile region, and also a highly taxed and occupied area. The term "Galilee of the Gentiles" in both passages makes reference to Galilee being occupied territory: in Isaiah, the occupied land of Galilee is ruled by the Assyrians, in Jesus time, by Rome.

Capernaum, where Jesus makes his new home, is a small agricultural and fishing village, comprised of an oppressed people who bear the brunt of imperial greed. It is also an area, however, as expressed in both passages, of hope for transformation by God's grace. This is where Jesus first brings his message. The message Jesus gives is this: Despite the darkness, darkness will not prevail. Light will triumph. So it is the light in which we must walk. Together.

I'm imagining what it was like to be around Jesus, this incredibly faithful man who exuded his faith, so that when he passed by some fishermen on the edges of the lake and said, "Follow me," they dropped everything and did just that. He was surrounded and infused by light, by positivity, by grace and welcoming and faith and love. There was no threat or fear, no forcefulness or demands.

It reminded me when I read the passage this time, oddly enough, of a startup company. I couldn't get that out of my mind. It was like the news of John's arrest motivated and catapulted Jesus to do something new, to gather followers and take on the hard and challenging work of love and light in a world that desperately needed it.

I thought of a Redwood High School graduate, who worked at a startup this past summer, between his junior and senior year at Stanford. At the end of the summer, the company wanted him to stay on full-time. Finish my senior year at Stanford, or stay in Venice Beach working at a startup... and he chose the latter. Now, it certainly helps that Stanford has a policy that a student who takes off for any number of reasons is always welcome to come back at any time and finish. Smart. But still. This young man was compelled enough by what this new innovative company had to offer, that he was willing to risk letting go of the security of the familiar. He wanted to follow and see.

I started doing some research on startups. A startup company is defined as: an entrepreneurial venture which is typically a newly emerged, fast-growing business that aims to meet a marketplace need by developing or offering an innovative product, process or service. A startup is usually a company such as a small business, a partnership or an organization designed to rapidly develop a scalable business model.

I wasn't sure if the metaphor worked for this particular passage, toying with the idea of the Jesus "startup" and how it was similar or not to today's startups. So I researched further. The definition of an entrepreneurial venture is, "the capacity and willingness to develop, organize, and manage a business venture along with any of its risks in order to make a profit.

Looking more closely at the words "business" and "profit," to determine if the metaphor is suitable: a business is an organizational entity involved in the provision of goods and services to consumers (those who use services or commodities). Ok, so

Jesus and his followers are an organization offering goods and services – good news and healing, those are certainly goods and services, and people were using the good news and the healings, right?

Then there was the word “profit” to consider. Jesus isn’t motivated by profits...or is he? The play on words was pointed out to me. Profit, prophet. Homonyms: words that sound alike but have different meanings. Profit can mean a financial gain and prophet, with a different spelling, can mean an inspired teacher or proclaimer of the will of God. Jesus, then, is the prophet, certainly motivated by prophets before him. Ok, I thought. Keep going.

Scalable business model. Hmmm. A business model is an abstract representation of an organization, be it conceptual, textual, and/or graphical, of all core interrelated architectural, co-operational, and financial arrangements designed and developed by an organization presently and in the future, as well as all core products and/or services the organization offers, or will offer, based on these arrangements that are needed to achieve its strategic goals and objectives. I think the financial arrangement is that the goods are given for free and the benefits are priceless.

So there you have it. I think Jesus was a successful startup. The entrepreneurial venture he began over 2,000 years ago is still being effectively utilized by people all over the world today. Good news and healing.

My son, a junior in college, is actually also quite invested in a startup, to understate it. He sent me a text this week of a sign he saw on a placard on the street that read: “Risk something, or forever sit with your dreams.” We find our way in life by following signs. Signs that confirm we’re headed in the right direction, or not. “Risk something, or forever sit with your dreams.” *The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.*

The gospel passage doesn’t tell us what the signs were for Simon and Andrew, for James and John. Just that Jesus offers them a job for no pay and they drop their nets, walk away from their boats and their father, and follow him, leaving what they know for the unknown. They follow Jesus’ initiative as he goes out with authority looking for partners to proclaim the good news of repentance, of turning away from false hopes and false profits and false prophets, and turning to the light, to the ways of God – the ways of peace and justice.

This is what Jesus wants us to follow, the ways of peace and justice, the seeking of the truth, the connection to that place inside of us where we believe, where we trust, where we love. Here’s one way I see that manifesting today.

I have permission from church member June Bellan and her husband, Bobby, to share an experience of this past week. June was admitted to the ER a week ago Friday because she had a 2-week long headache. It was immediately determined by CT scan that she had tumors in her brain that appeared cancerous. A second scan of

her abdomen revealed a tumor in her lungs, which was biopsied on Wednesday, with the possibility of it being an infection rather than cancer. The results of the biopsy were made known when a group of blue-clad clinicians arrived with a gurney on Thursday morning, whisking June away to her first full-head radiation treatment at 1350 S. Eliseo. It was cancer.

When I arrived at her room at the radiation center, she was awaiting treatment as the doctor, Joseph Poen, was still mapping it out. "Take as long as you need," was her attitude. June and Bobby were relaxed, calm, in good spirits, and laughing together. They keep saying, every time I see them, "God is bigger than these tumors." Both of them looked radiant, and this is before the radiation treatment. They are filled to the brim with faith.

June easily sat up on her own from a reclined position, and requested that we sing. I had brought a hymnal, and we sang "Great is Thy Faithfulness," every word, as at our prior visit neither of us could remember the full verses. We sat together in an embrace, singing together wholeheartedly and with great confidence: *Morning by morning new mercies I see; all I have needed, thy hand hath provided: Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.* After singing and a prayer, the doctor came in and said he was finally ready, apologizing that it had taken so long to map out the procedure— all morning, about 3 hours of waiting. "Oh, that's ok," June said with a big smile, "we were just singing!" and with that, she was taken away for treatment.

Now alone with Bobby, I asked how he was doing. "I'm a little tired," he said, "but I'm sleeping well at night." He went on to say, and I quote, that they are "walking in the light, not in the dark." "The darkness wants you to be fearful and steal your joy," he continued. "It's difficult to heal if you are fearful. Our doctor knows the new technology and is focused on the cure, and so are we. God walks beside us on this road and will use June as an example of His grace and love."

These exact words were both spoken to me by Bobby, and written through texts. What an illustration for the Isaiah passage read today: "There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined; they rejoice before you, for the yoke of their burden you have broken."

Being with June and Bobby was remarkable and profound. They said the prayers are working and to keep them up. June was released home yesterday afternoon, the absolute best-case scenario for her. "God is good," she says, "All the time!" Their love and faith is so strong, so palpable, such a witness, such a draw. *Why would you live any other way*, I thought, as I left the hospital.

There was a beautiful and pertinent prayer I happened upon in my preparation this week, and I invite you to pray it with me now: "God, the darkness loves to parade itself, to draw our attention and steal our energy, with fearful threats and dire prophecies of doom; and we all too easily give it just what it seeks. But, if we can

just drag our gaze away we discover that there is another reality; that your light shines undimmed, that your care is undiminished, that your strength and protection are unfailing. And so, even in the midst of pain, suffering, evil, even when it seems your light is almost out, we choose to remain under the shadow of your wings; to trust in your salvation, to speak your words, and to dispel the darkness by lighting the flame of faith again in our hearts. Amen.”

Friends, the good news is that the light is available to us always. Let us together choose to live in the light, to follow Jesus in the startup venture he fruitfully inaugurated so many years ago.