

Isaiah 9:1-4 (Third Sunday after the Epiphany—Series A)

“The Light That Grants Us Peace”

Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT

January 22, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text is the Old Testament lesson recorded in Isaiah 9:

¹For there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. As in the former time He treated with contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time He makes glorious the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ²The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; those dwelling in a land of gloom, a light has shone upon them. ³You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as when they rejoice in their dividing the spoil. ⁴For the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of the one oppressing him, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Here is a letter written to you from an individual who lived in the village of Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee:

Shalom! Peace be with you. I can say that with much more confidence now than I ever could before. I now know peace better than ever before because I now know the Light of God.

Living in the region of Galilee has always been a challenge for God’s people. The allotment of land given to the Tribes of Asher, Manasseh, Zebulun, and Naphtali have bordered what we called “Gentile territory.” These were lands of the non-Israelite people. And so, God’s people there especially lived under the threat of invasion as well as an influx of religious thoughts that ran contrary to God’s Law as He gave it to us through His servant Moses. The Gentiles worshiped false gods, idols. And the nations who adored these idols tempted God’s people to forsake Him and worship them.

The author of the Book of Judges tells us the sad pattern for God's people. From chapter 2, "And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress" (Judg. 2:11–15 ESV).

That distress is what came upon the region of Galilee, gloom among the tribes of Manasseh, Zebulun, and Naphtali. Judges 6 tells us, "The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste

the land as they came in. And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the LORD” (Judg. 6:1–6 ESV).

Can you imagine living in caves? Can you imagine your food and lands being ravaged so fiercely that you had to dwell in mountain dens like a wild animal? And yet that was the Lord’s just punishment against the people who had broken His First Commandment and offered their fear, love, and trust to false gods, forsaking the one, true God. Galilee’s gloom and darkness at the hands of the Midianites was a reflection of their deeper gloom and darkness before God whom they had abandoned.

But God wouldn’t abandon His covenant people. Out of His mercy and grace, God heard the prayers of His sinful people as they turned to Him in fear over their enemies. The Lord raised up His servant Gideon. And with only 300 men, with the blowing of trumpets and the smashing of jars with torches inside, God defeated the Midianites by turning the Midianites against one another! It was a rout! And the men of Israel came out of the territory of Naphtali and from Manasseh, and they pursued the invaders. God had saved His people, even though they had sinned against Him and turned their backs on Him. A God of steadfast love and underserved kindness is He!

But the land and people brought into the light of the Lord would return to the darkness of unfaithfulness and idolatry time and time again. God’s prophet Isaiah wrote the word of God you heard this morning after Galilee and all the tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had succumbed to the Assyrian invaders. Zebulun and Naphtali were first devastated and depopulated by the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser III. You can read in 2 Kings 15, “In the days

of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured . . . Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria" (2 Kings 15:29 ESV).

This was again God's judgment against the sins of His covenant people. They worshiped false gods. The people of Israel were corrupt in the marketplace, in politics, in their worship. Despite the word of God from prophet after prophet, the people wouldn't repent of their sins. They would not turn in faith to the Lord. The northern tribes of Israel, the land of Galilee, would be attacked and conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. God had warned them of the darkness and gloom to come because of their sinful rejection of Him. But they would not return to the Lord in repentance and faith. Once deported by the victors, the survivors of Israel would never return. They would become the famous 10 lost tribes of Israel.

The story doesn't get any better, I'm afraid. The Southern Kingdom of Judah would fall in 587 B.C. to the Babylonians. Thankfully, under Cyrus the Persian, the Babylonian exiles would be allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild her walls and temple. But things were never the same in Galilee. The Assyrians resettled their population among the remaining Israelites. They would intermarry and become what you know as the Samaritans, which the Jews termed "half-breeds," half Jewish, half Gentile, not worthy of God in their eyes. And so, the years passed by. After the Babylonians came the Persians, after the Persians came the Greeks, and after the Greeks we now have the Romans.

Israel's brought upon her as a nation the darkness of punishment. Isn't that what our sin, our individual unfaithfulness to the Lord, also brings upon us?—the darkness and gloom of guilt and shame; the deep darkness of death of hell. This whole world is shrouded in

death, evil, and ignorance because of sin. This darkness is painted with the tints of evil and opposition to God and His revealed Word. People aren't even interested in God's free gift of salvation through His Anointed One, the Messiah-Savior! And just look at the evil in your own heart. I know, I don't like looking there myself, but when we hear God's Word of Law that tells us how we should be and act and think, we fall miserably short. I don't want my sins exposed, but God's Word and Spirit convict me. I see the darkness and gloom of my sin.

But then you and I hear Isaiah's words. "For there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. As in the former time He treated with contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time He makes glorious the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; those dwelling in a land of gloom, a light has shone upon them." Light is the only thing that can penetrate and dispel darkness, for darkness is the absence of light. In the place of calamity and gloom, God promised that His people would see the light of peace and blessing.

That Light is not a beam or an illumination from a lamp, but a person. Jesus of Nazareth came and lived here in Capernaum. He proclaimed, "Repent, for the reign and rule of heaven is near and is now here!" This Jesus had been teaching in our synagogues and proclaiming the Good News of God's reign and rule. He proved that Good News by His actions of healing every disease and every affliction among the people. He even cast out demons and healed paralytics (Matt. 4:23-24).

Jesus is the Light that brings life and immortality to light, dispelling the effects of sin and the deep darkness of our idolatry. This Light appeared to bring the reign and rule of God among us and to us. We have seen a great light. Jesus, the true Light, shines. As on the day

of Midian, God has acted for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. God has defeated the powers of sin and Satan. He has brought a crushing blow to death. Our greatest enemies lie in defeat because Jesus the Light of the world gave up His life into death on a Roman cross. The great Light, God's Son, was enveloped by the darkness of our evil and sin, as He suffered on that cross. Jesus went into the darkness. As the Lamb of God bearing the sins of the world, He became the "darkness of the world" for us so that we might be the "light of the world" in Him by God's steadfast love, mercy, and grace.

Jesus, the preacher and healer from Galilee, God's own Son in human flesh and blood, is the Messiah—Savior. He offered Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of His people Israel and for the sins of the nations. Isaiah promised this. He said that God would "multiply the nation." In chapter 60, the prophet wrote, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Is. 60:1–3 ESV). In Jesus, God has done just that by incorporating the nations into His Israel, the whole people of God who have faith in Jesus Christ, who are washed in His blood, and baptized into His death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting.

And that is you. You are the people of God in Christ Jesus. "You were washed, you were [made holy], you were [declared righteous] in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11 ESV). Salvation from the darkness and gloom of sin and death have come to you by God's free grace and favor through our Lord, Jesus Christ. And it

is that salvation in the forgiveness of sins that grants us true peace, real *shalom*. In Jesus, God has given “light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace”—the peace of sins forgiven, the peace of victory over death because of the gift of eternal life in the resurrection (Luke 1:79 ESV).

I pray that the Good News of Jesus, the true Light, would always cause you to rejoice in your Savior as you walk by faith and not by sight. Shalom in the name of Jesus. Amen.