

## “A Great Light” by Tim Hall

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A) – January 22, 2023

[RCL:] Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27:1, 5-13, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-23

*O God, our strength and our redeemer, give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to know your love through our time together here today. Amen.*

This year there are seven Sundays in the season after the Epiphany, traditionally observed as a time for experiencing and sharing the light of Christ. The Sundays after the Epiphany detail **the revelation of Jesus’ light to the world** by telling the stories of his baptism – which we heard two weeks ago when we renewed our own baptismal vows, the calling of the disciples – last Sunday and today, his first miracles, and many of his key teachings.

Next Sunday is the halfway point through the season, when we will hear The Beatitudes, an excerpt from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The season ends with **the Transfiguration**, when “light” goes from being a metaphor to being literal. In the story, Jesus amazes and confuses his disciples on the mountaintop when his clothes “*become as bright as a flash of lightning*” and Moses and Elijah appear in the dazzling light with him.

And as the season progresses, the days keep getting a bit longer, inexorably marching onwards towards the Vernal Equinox and the Summer Solstice. It’s time for us to exit our caves, greet this new light in the world, stretch our spiritual sinews, and, with renewed energy and commitment, continue on with the joy of following Jesus!

Our readings from Isaiah and Matthew this morning both reference what is, at least to me, a somewhat weird and obscure story of the people who lived and walked and sat in darkness. The people of Zebulun and Naphtali. Who??

Even though I’ve taken a 9-month course on the Old Testament and these names sounded familiar, I still had to dig a bit deeper. **And in so doing I unearthed a most amazing story.** One that was, no doubt, well known to the Hebrews of Isaiah’s time and, probably, to the Jews of Jesus’ time, as well.

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the twelve sons of Jacob. Their descendants, who ultimately became two of the twelve tribes of Israel, settled in the northern regions of the Holy Land, on the western side of the Sea of Galilee.

They had fallen away from worshipping the one God, doing what was evil in His sight, and for that God had given them over to the Midianites. After seven years of hardship the Israelites were in a bad way and, seeking to repent, called to the Lord for deliverance.

So the Lord called a prophet, Gideon, girding him up as he had so many others. Then, as recounted in the Book of Judges, chapters 6 and 7, God worked through Gideon and his pitifully outnumbered band of warriors to glorify God.

On the Lord's instruction, Gideon whittles the Israelites down to an army of only 300. Because what kind of a victory would it be for the Lord if the original 22,000 assembled from the various tribes won the battle?

Gideon, at the Lord's bidding, equips each of the 300 with a torch in a pot and a trumpet and then stealthily encircles the huge army of Midianites, and at the right moment,

*"They blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands... They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled." (Judges 7:20-21)*

What a resounding and supernatural victory! This is the Day of Midian – the day that **God vanquished Israel's foes** through a mighty defeat that depended on a group of men armed with trumpets, broken pots, and light shining in the darkness.

God redeemed the Israelites – on them a great light has shined – and God made it quite plain that this was no ordinary military victory: this was the arm of the Lord at work, mighty to save. This is what is being recalled in our passage from Isaiah. And two verses later Isaiah says,

*"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)*

And this is precisely what Jesus knew when he withdrew to Galilee. Nazareth, although a city of some 80,000 today, was in Jesus' day a small village of farmers and tradesmen in the rugged high country about 20 miles west of the Sea of Galilee.

Capernaum, on the other hand, was a more bustling trade route center, right on the lake. After being rejected in his home town, Capernaum probably was **much more of a draw as a place to practice his ministry**, so that's where Jesus went, fulfilling Isaiah's prophesy and finding a much more welcoming audience.

Immediately he calls Peter and Andrew to follow him. And then the sons of Zebedee, James and John. Last week, after asking them what they were looking for, Jesus invited them to come and see. Today he promises to teach them how to fish for people.

And off they go. Just as Jesus left his home, so **they too leave their homes, their “comfort zones”, to follow him** – to help with the teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing the sick and the lame.

Jesus invites us, **today and every day**, to follow him. To help bring his life-giving light to people still living in darkness. But how can we, such small and weak people, hope to do this? In our collect this morning we prayed for strength *“to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation.”* And at the beginning of this homily we prayed that God would *“give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to know.”*

This is the challenge before us today: what are we looking for, who are we listening to, what are we valuing most in our common life together?

These are questions that require us to consider our past, make a full, honest, and accurate assessment of our present situation, and inspire us to look to our future.

In today’s gospel, Jesus gives us clear direction regarding the past, present, and future. He tells us what we are to look for, what we are to listen to, and what we must value above all else.

First, the past — clear and simple... Jesus says “Repent.”

Repent — for we are all of us sinners. We have each one of us alone and all of us together failed to live up to our true calling. We have made mistakes. We have fallen down.

But Jesus says, “Get up and try again. Strive to do better.” Repent. We are forgiven, loved, and free. So repent... try again to hear God’s voice.

As for the present: Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus lived among us to proclaim that God’s mercy, justice, and love are already here — So close we can touch, taste, smell, see, and hear it — if that is what we are looking and listening for.

This is not to deny the sometimes-painful realities of our world — not to forget about hunger amidst so much waste, or homelessness amidst economic vitality, or sickness amidst amazing healing power.

This is to say **we are all sinners**, and that we can make a choice whether to dwell on life’s problems or to look for life’s opportunities. Are we going to wrestle with the devil, or dance with the savior? Which shoulder will we be looking at? Taste and see, for God is good — and God’s kingdom has drawn near.

So, look around for signs of the kingdom, here and now. And keep looking.

As for the future: Jesus says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” **We are called — each and every one of us, and all of us together — to bring the light of lights into the world**, to proclaim to all people the Good News of salvation, to make known the glory of God’s marvelous works.

Our calling as a Christian community is not to repair the roof, or balance the books, or print up the bulletin, or run a perfect Zoom meeting. Oh, these things are important — essential to the building up of Christ’s body, really.

But budgets and reports and achievements — they are not our mission, they are not what Jesus calls us to listen to, they are not what our Lord and Savior asks, even commands us to value. **What he really wants us to value is him...** and to share him with everyone we meet... to be ambassadors of Christ, evangelists.

So—this is the charge to us today: “Let it shine.” Repent, and it will shine. Look for signs that the kingdom has drawn near, and it will shine. Follow Christ, and it will shine.

And what will happen if we let it shine? What will we let shine, precisely?

Will the bills get paid if we don’t open our mail? Will we continue to have ice cream socials or harvest dinners or a meditation garden if no one volunteers to work? Will the septic system repair itself if we simply pray? — probably not. We need to attend to these things, to be sure.

But if, instead of harboring resentments, we work toward forgiveness; instead of marking divisions we seek agreement; instead of simply praying we *pray simply* — then what will shine will be the very light of salvation, the sure and certain hope of everlasting life.

Pray simply, repenting of your past mistakes. Pray simply, proclaiming that the kingdom of God has drawn near. Pray simply, promising, “Yes, Lord Jesus, I will follow you.” For God’s grace invites us, and Jesus’ love unites us, and the Holy Spirit of Light empowers us — to work for the kingdom and to answer our call.

~ Amen.