

A Light Has Shined in the Darkness

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Prayer of Illumination

Shine your light upon us, O God, as we seek to be enlightened.
By your Spirit, open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts
as we prepare for the coming of your Son.
Amen.

Background

The scene is set. Everything in the travel itinerary of Jesus the Messiah was going seamlessly according to God's long laid out plan:

- Jesus' birth...*check*.
- His baptism...*check*.
- Resisting the devil's temptations in the wilderness...*check*.

But then, a monkey wrench got thrown into the plans: Jesus' relative John the Baptist was thrown into prison by Herod. Since John was imprisoned, Jesus might well be next on Herod's Most Wanted List. Jesus needed to fly under Herod's radar and withdraw to Galilee.

But Matthew reminds us this is no accident. Jesus is in Galilee for a purpose: to begin his public ministry—just as the Hebrew Scriptures foretold long ago. Jesus wasn't just escaping Herod. God was preparing Jesus for something new. You see, to start something new, you often have to let go of the old. And Galilee was very different from Nazareth.

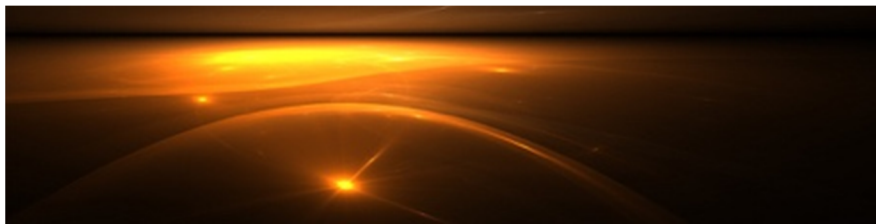
Capernaum had a large fishing industry there by the Sea of Galilee. Galilee was also known for being very open to new ideas. It was a region surrounded by foreign peoples: Syrians, Samaritans, and Phoenicians. Galileans were famous for being courageous, quick tempered, and early adopters of innovation. As one commentator said, "Galilee was the one place in Palestine where a new teacher with a new message had any chance of being heard." If Nazareth was out in the sticks, Galilee was on the way to everywhere. The Way of the Sea and the Road to the East all went through Galilee. The traffic of the world passed through Galilee. In other words, in Galilee, the good NEWS of the gospel would travel fast in all directions. North, East, West, South. Not just to Jews, but Gentiles—all the people of the world. Yes, God was at work for the Galilean gospel to go into all the world.

And the message that Jesus proclaimed was a bold message for a bold people. This wasn't a message of "maybes," "could bes," "perhapses," or "possibilities." No, it rang with authority.



Repent. In Aramaic, "*repent*" means "return home." Christ was making it possible for us to be who we really are—to come back home to our roots, to who God originally created us to be.

He's made a way for a real metamorphosis in our lives, a change from the inside out—a transfiguration of our being and doing.



Light was dawning on those who lived in the land of death's dark shadow. King Jesus didn't come to fight darkness with darkness. No, he was overcoming darkness with light—a great light, a living epiphany bringing spiritual insight, hope, and healing to all.

His invitation and call to follow lights our way in the darkness, step by step, to a life of purpose, service, and meaning.

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Gospel Reading: Matthew 4:12-23 (NRSVue)

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—
¹⁶ 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."

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

¹⁸ 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 fishers.

¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ 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. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – A Light Has Shined in the Darkness

In psychiatrist Victor Frankl's classic *"Man's Search for Meaning"* he describes his experience surviving imprisonment in Auschwitz during WW2. In the book he sought to answer this question: *How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner?*

But ultimately, the purpose of the book is to help anyone, in any situation, find meaning to carry on, to cultivate a will to live, even in the worst situations imaginable.

In one scene, Frankl found himself in the middle of winter on a cold and dreary early morning. *Everything* was grey—the sky, the snow, the rags they wore for clothes, even their faces. Frankl and his fellow prisoners were digging a trench. It was a particularly discouraging time and he was struggling to find the reason for his sufferings and his slow dying.

Then he shares,

"In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of immanent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious, "YES" in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose."

At that moment Frankl looked up and saw a light that was suddenly lit in a distant farmhouse. The shining farmhouse stood in the horizon, almost like it was painted there, right in the middle of that miserable gray morning in Bavaria. And then he quoted to himself words from the Scripture we just read:

"And the light shineth in the darkness."

He sensed a presence, a loving presence with him. And then a bird silently flew by him and perched on a mound of soil he had just dug from the ditch. And the bird stared steadily at him. It was this flicker of hope in the darkness that kept Frankl going.

Do you remember from our Scripture passage Jesus' first words to Peter and his brother?

"...Follow me."

Do you know Jesus' last words to Peter before returning to the Father?

"Follow me."

Not just my teachings but follow *"me."* Don't just listen to me, follow me. Follow me and I will make you into something new. I will be your hope. Your light. Your way in the darkness.

Jesus' invitation echoes today. Will you follow me? Will you let me shape you and make you into something new? This is the good news: Jesus chooses ordinary people to do the extraordinary.

Once the great Greek philosopher Socrates was approached by a very ordinary man named Aeschines (Es-ka-nees). "I'm a poor man," Aeschines said. "I have nothing else, but I give you myself." "Don't you see," said Socrates, "that you're giving me the most precious thing of all?"

This is who Jesus is calling, who Jesus needs, who Jesus is looking for. Not fancy, accomplished, perfect, or polished people. It isn't a prerequisite to have a perfect pedigree or bright future. Jesus just wants ordinary men, women, and children who will give themselves to him and follow him. That is precious in his sight. Jesus can and has changed the world with people like this. With people like you and me. Jesus longs for those who are "all in." Those who have a right spirit and an adventurous spirit. Those who are open to the future and are willing to boldly step out in faith and to allow the great light of the Son of God shine through them in their dealings with others.



Jesus invites you to follow him.

- If you're a fisherman, follow Jesus and he will make you fish for people.
- If you're a seamstress, love Jesus sew much that he'll help you clothe others with his love.
- If you're a teacher, sit at the feet of our Master Teacher and he'll help you guide the next generation under your tutelage.
- If you're a homemaker, follow Jesus and he'll help you nurture shalom in your home.
- If you're a florist, plant yourself in the Lilly of the Valley and he'll make you a fragrant aroma to others.

Our passage says immediately they followed Jesus. They dropped their nets. Didn't clutch or cling to them. Said goodbye to their old life. Hello to their new life in Christ. They went all out.

Jesus is worth following because he gives us new management to live under. His call is a call to companionship and partnership. To follow his lead and be close to him, to go where he leads. To do what he does. And in so doing he helps us choose joy. In fact, he multiplies our joy. Helps us to spread it to others. He exchanges our gloom for great gladness. Takes our shame and gives us honor and dignity.

"The light has shined in the darkness."

Let Christ's epiphany light shine in and through you.

Amen.

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