

Sermon – Third Sunday After Epiphany

Scripture Texts: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1,5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *The call to follow Jesus does carry a cost, and may sometimes lead us into harm's way on behalf of those in need; but, it is ultimately a call to walk in the light, rather than the darkness: to choose joy over despair, mercy over utility, and life over death.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline

1. Light in the dark places

- a. I've preached some heavy sermons lately, as we've dealt with heavy circumstances in our world.
 - i. I was aiming for a lighter sermon this week, especially because I've talked with some of you over the past couple of years about how church is the place you come to get away from the weight of the world, to focus peace and hope.
 - ii. I hear that, and I appreciate those feelings, so I had been aiming for a lighter sermon today – to avoid dwelling on the tension in our world and to focus on peace and hope.
 - iii. But, like many of you, my plans and hopes were interrupted yesterday by the news out of Minnesota about federal agents killing another person, by the claims from the government that seem to be contradicted by video footage.
- b. I can't avoid events like this on Sunday morning, as much as I'd like to.
 - i. I can't ignore them because I know that many of you are struggling with them as well, struggling with feelings of anger and fear and despair and helplessness.
 - ii. I can't ignore them because I know that many of you are asking why God would allow this to happen.
 - iii. But most of all, I can't ignore these kinds of events because I believe that Jesus is serious about showing up with light in the darkest places.
- c. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light"
 - i. Did you catch that line in our readings today?
 - ii. It is a line that matters deeply to our church – as it is written (in Swedish) on the Bible that hangs with the cherubs on the front of our organ loft. And, it shows up twice in today's readings.
 - iii. First, in the reading from Isaiah, where the prophet is looking forward to a time when God will lead the people of Israel out of the darkness and oppression into new life and light;
 - iv. Second, Isaiah is quoted in Matthew's Gospel as a way of understanding the purpose and meaning of Jesus' ministry. Indeed, this passage records the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, and the calling of his very first followers.

2. The light of Jesus

- a. Our Gospel passage today begins in darkness, as Jesus hears about his cousin, John the Baptist, having been arrested and put in prison.

- i. Up to this point, Jesus has been preparing for ministry. In Chapter 3 of Matthew's gospel, he goes to John and is baptized – committing himself to righteousness, to right relationship with God and creation.
- ii. From the baptism, Jesus goes out into the wilderness to be tempted, and we will look at Matthew's account of this temptation in a few weeks as we begin our Lenten journey for the year.
- iii. But, while Jesus has been preparing for ministry, he does not actually begin until he hears about John's imprisonment. This is a move by the powers of the world to oppose the kingdom of God – a move by the forces of darkness to oppose John's testimony to the light of God. And, it seems to be what sets Jesus in motion.
- b. In response to this news, Jesus begins to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."
 - i. But, it is important that we understand this word: "repent".
 - ii. Jesus is not going around shaming people for moral failures, or telling them they need to feel remorse for failing to live up to some legal code. He isn't trying to enforce obedience to some authority (earthly or heavenly).
 - iii. Instead, the Greek word, *μετανοέω* = *metanoieo*, speak to a changing of the mind, or of a complete reorientation.
- c. This is where the quotation from Isaiah is so helpful: "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."
 - i. Jesus begins his ministry by calling people to reorient their lives from darkness to light. But what does that mean?
 - ii. I've been thinking a lot this week about how much easier it is for us to define and orient ourselves by what we are against than by what we are for. It is easy and tempting to focus on the ideas we disagree with and the people we hate. This is a trap that I sometimes fall into, when I focus too much on the failings of some of the communities of faith that I was raised in. But defining ourselves by what we are against is to walk in darkness, rather than light.
 - iii. If we look at Jesus, he does occasionally have harsh words for religious authorities who are misusing their power. But, that's not where his focus is. Instead, most of his time and energy are spent on teaching about mercy and justice and peace and grace and love, on caring for people who are hurting, on curing sickness and disease, and on proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

3. *"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."*

- a. This is the call for us who would follow Jesus – to orient ourselves not on the darkness of the world, but on the light of Christ.
 - i. We see this in Jesus' call to his first disciples: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."
 - ii. Our task is not, primarily, to go identify and fix everything that is wrong with the world. Rather, our task is to focus on people – to draw them toward the light and peace and grace and mercy and hope and love of God's kingdom.
- b. That doesn't mean that following Jesus will be all about sunshine and rainbows.
 - i. For the past week and a half, I keep coming back to a statement by the Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, Rob Hirschfield. He called on clergy to get

their affairs in order, because our times may require us to place our bodies “between the powers of this world and the most vulnerable.”

- ii. This has been a historic witness of the church, in which followers of Jesus have sometimes faced persecution and death in testament to God’s love for “the least” among us – for those who have been demonized and oppressed and exploited and harmed by the powers of the world.
- iii. This is done not in a seeking of death or darkness – not in a pursuit of martyrdom – but in trust that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the God of light and life, and that God is able to care for us as well.

c. I pray that no one in our community will be called upon to make that kind of sacrifice. But I do believe that we are all called to repent, to orient our lives toward the light of Jesus and toward the people that God loves so dearly.

- i. As easy as it is to focus on the things that are broken in our world, I pray that, like Jesus hearing the news of John’s arrest, the darkness might turn our focus to those in need around us – that we can define and orient ourselves not on what we are against, but on what and who we are for.
- ii. So, get to know your neighbors, that you might be able to respond to their needs and anxieties.
- iii. Get involved with local community watch groups, which are forming to care and advocate for immigrants and refugees.
- iv. Join with the missions committee in packing lunches next Sunday, and consider coming out to POWER Interfaith’s city-wide assembly on affordability.
- v. And, even when you are filled with anger, pray for your enemies and those with whom you disagree – for they too are children of God. Even as they walk in darkness, we are called to pray that they, too, might see a great light.

Amen.