

Second Sunday after the Epiphany - January 15, 2023

Isaiah 9:2–7

Matthew 4:12–17

“Light Has Dawned”

1. In situations where there is little to no light, a sudden burst of light can be blinding
 - a. This can be true whether we’re feeling our way through our house after everyone has gone to bed and we turn on a kitchen or bathroom light
 - b. I know it is also true when driving in the country at night, and an incoming vehicle has their high beams on.
 - c. It takes our eyes a little while to adjust to the change from little light to SO MUCH light
 - d. Do you know why pirates wore an eye patch? (It would make Marietta happy to hear me reference pirates in a sermon)
 - i. It may not be what you’re thinking about
 - ii. I had a friend in high school who wore an eye patch.
 - iii. For him it was because he had had an accident, and he no longer had a right eye, so the patch covered that area
 - iv. That may well have been the case for some pirates: they may have been missing an eye.
 - v. But why would SO MANY wear an eye patch? Was eye injury so much of a workplace hazard?
 - vi. Well, as it turns out, there may have been an alternative purpose.
 1. “Some assume pirates [did wear] eye patches to cover a missing eye or an eye that was wounded in battle, but in fact, an eye patch was more likely to be used to condition the eye so the pirate could fight in the dark.”
<https://www.childrensmuseum.org/blog/why-did-some-pirates-wear-an-eye-patch#:~:text=Some%20assume%20pirates%20wore%20eye,could%20fight%20in%20the%20dark>
 2. In other words, in the middle of a daytime battle on their ship, if the fight required the pirate to go below deck, the covered eye was ready for a fight in the dark, and the pirate would flip up the patch and keep fighting below deck
 - vii. That’s a pretty ingenious hack, when you think about it, to help make the transition between two different environments – with light, with no light
 - viii. The transition, of course, would still be difficult going back up on deck, to the place of light, as there would not be a way to condition

the unpatched eye for the trip back up to a bright environment on deck.

2. The scriptures for today talk to us about a transition from no light to bright light, and I would argue, about the potential of going back and forth between those kinds of environments
 - a. Consider light as the symbol for God's presence and message, and the lack of light as the absence of that presence or message (translated as bleakness and as the shadow of death in our passage today – like in Psalm 23)
 - i. Isaiah proclaims: A light has shined!
 1. In the original and in the quote in the gospel the people, the women, men and children, have seen a great light!
 2. Parts of the passage might remind us of Advent, of Christmas, of Handel's Messiah: the people have seen a great light! What a Joy!
 3. But the part we may not remember (or may not have noticed) is the description of their joy.
 4. The Joy of harvest. Got it. That sounds joyful.
 5. But then there is Joy as when a victorious people go through a battlefield where they have won,
 - a. an area or city no longer in active conflict but now littered with belongings left behind by the defeated army.
 - b. There is the joy as they burned the bloody uniforms of the dead (their side? our side? Does it really matter as long as "we" won?)
 6. Whoa! That is such a troubling picture!
 7. When Isaiah said they were happy implies they had lived through some terrible suffering and had come through to the other side!
 - ii. That's the light that has dawned in what Matthew quotes from Isaiah
 1. The light of a God who sees the suffering of the people and who is here to end the violence and bring the Peace of Peace
 - b. Our passages are interrelated as part of the church's season of Epiphany

- i. While we most closely associate Epiphany with January 6 and the arrival of the Magi, the word Epiphany indicates it as a time of revelation!
 - ii. Epiphany means “manifestation or appearance... In classical Greek it was used for the appearance of dawn... especially of a manifestation of a deity to a worshiper.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_\(holiday\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_(holiday))
 - iii. God is revealing God’s purpose – and it’s good news!
 - iv. Jesus enters the scene as John exits
 - v. Jesus is anticipating joy from the people at God’s good news, joy as if coming out from a place of no light to a place of light
 - 1. And they were in a tough, bleak moment.
 - 2. They were under occupation and oppression by the Roman government
 - 3. And Jesus is saying it’s time for the light of God to dawn
 - 4. Repent! – Turning around and go in God’s direction, towards that light
- 3. But, as I mentioned, it is difficult to get used to the light: It is difficult to see just how that BRIGHT reality could be fully here.
 - a. Jesus preached: “Repent! For the realm of the heavens has come near!”
 - i. He’s inviting the people to adjust to God’s light, a light of love and justice
 - b. But Jesus also knew of the violence and injustice they still lived with every day
 - i. Is that like walking back and forth between a place with light and no light?
 - ii. A pirate patch might come in handy!
 - c. The people lived as though going from shadows to light to shadows again,
 - i. maybe not wearing an eye patch, but shielding their hearts and minds
 - ii. or numbing their sensitivity to the ongoing un-heaven-like realities they lived with (injustice, evil, war) only to seek to return somehow to places of respite (synagogue? Home?) where they keep those threats at bay as best they could.
 - d. But it’s exhausting to do that back and forth
 - e. And what’s more, Jesus is saying: No! stay in the light.

- i. Turn back from the other side (repent) and stay here where the light of God's realm shines and exposes all the things the shadows want us to get used to.
- f. Someone might argue: but if it's not fully "light" out
 - i. (the realm of heaven isn't fully here),
 - ii. is it so bad then to make allowances for the shadows of injustice and evil which seem not to be banished (and seem to be holding on to power)?
- g. I would respond that being OK with the shadows of injustice, or perhaps just throwing up our hands in despair at the presence of that injustice, is not the joy which Isaiah or Jesus were talking about
 - i. Isaiah and Jesus were both pointing to a massive turn around happening before their very eyes in the presence of such brightness as to make them squint
 - ii. Think of it from the perspective of the social justice ministries which this congregation holds dear and supports.
 1. Last week, women made up about half of the crowd up here for the laying of hands in the ordination of Anthony Merida and the installation of our elders and deacons.
 2. Consider that when this particular congregation was founded nearly 200 years ago, that group would have been entirely men. Straight, older men.
 3. Within the last 100 years, the Presbyterian Church nationally has formally recognized that God calls men and women, LGBTQ and straight to be ordained as elders, deacons and ministers.
 4. Now that we have seen ministry with that light, we can't unsee it.
 5. We have been led by that full variety of elders, deacons and ministers.
 6. We take it as a matter of principle. We have adjusted to that light.
- h. And so it is when we see other systemic injustices
 - i. They seem glaring when the light of the gospel is shining (like structural racism and systemic poverty),

- ii. Isaiah and Jesus are calling us to stay in the light, to recognize these systemic issues as being contrary to the realm of heaven, and then to be fortified for calling them out again and again.
 - iii. It can't be a matter of tolerating an injustice because it's too big a problem to tackle let alone fix.
 - iv. That amounts to shading our hearts (or our eyes) to the full light of God.
- i. Yes, that is difficult. Yes, that puts us on a collision course with the shadowy systems which keep people down.
 - i. But it is the call of Jesus. More than that! It's the example of what he did and taught!
- j. That's part of why Jesus talks of repentance. And it's an ongoing part.
 - i. But a part which can help us rejoice for the light of God even in the midst of the evidence of violence suffered by people which society willingly marginalizes:
 - ii. we rejoice because the light is here and now we can all see that from God's perspective, that fight is over, that argument has been settled.
- 4. The people who sat in the shadows have seen a great light, and the world looked different, finally as God had intended. And they could not unsee what God had shown them to be true and right. And that was reason to rejoice. Thanks be to God.

Sources: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-412-23-3>

Moment for Mission:

Sabbatical

1. Please do something for me. Let's take a deep long breath through the nose and let it out slowly through the mouth. Ready?
 - a. One more. Ready? Thank you.
2. It seems ridiculous that we have to remind each other in times of stress to breathe.
 - a. We breathe all the time! Why do we need to be reminded?
 - b. Well, when it comes to dealing with stress, to reconnecting with our bodies, to be connected to the Spirit / Breath of God – we pay attention to our breathing.
3. In the Genesis story of creation, on the seventh day, God takes a breather
 - a. Does God really need a day of rest after six days of work?
 - b. Well, God was modeling for us humans that a cycle of life includes day and night, work and rest.
 - c. And that's not the only breather God called for: every seventh year God said the people should have a sabbath year, and the land and the people would rest.
4. I just celebrated my seventh anniversary with you. I am so grateful that the session and you the congregation are allowing me to take a Sabbatical, modeled after that Biblical concept.
 - a. It will not be a year, but it will be three months this summer.
 - b. My time away will be basically from the week before Memorial Day to Labor Day.
 - c. I have divided that time into three parts: Rest, Renewal, Return.
 - i. Rest will be a time for breathing, morning run or ride, long weekend with friends
 - ii. Renewal will be a time for travel and learning (France and Scotland by myself and Scotland and Ireland with Tracy)
 - iii. Return will be a time to look forward and prepare my mindset for the church bicentennial in 2024
 - d. But a sabbatical is not only for the minister, it is for the congregation as well
 - i. So while I'm away, we're bringing in a pastor to minister part time, to shepherd us and our committees, to take a breath and slow down

- ii. We'll look for renewing worship, with guest preachers and we'll plan periods of consistency (a same preacher for a few weeks, for instance)
 - iii. We'll care for each other, with deacons keeping in touch with members, and on-call pastors in our midst on call for emergencies.
 - e. The worship and the sabbatical committees are talking about some creative and renewing things happening this summer
 - i. And we will want to know : what feels renewing for you? What brings you joy?
 - ii. We will be in conversation with you to shape the experience
 - iii. You will have creative worship, wonderful music
 - iv. You'll gather share stories and have meals
 - v. You'll get to know one another more and look ahead to 2024 (Bicentennial)
- 5. Session and I have saved some money for this purpose, and in February we'll also be reaching out to the congregation and to the foundation for additional financial support to make it possible. We're confident we have a plan to make it work.
- 6. Today I will be sharing details about the Sabbatical in the AFE time following worship and coffee hour, so come to the Laws Room or on Zoom to learn more and ask questions.
- 7. Again, thank you for investing in me and in one another this summer.