

January 24 & 25, 2026 – Epiphany 3

Matthew 4:12-23

Dear friends in Christ Jesus:

Have you ever been in on one of those guided tours of any of a number of caves around our country like the Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico? As you tour the cave, they'll turn out the lights and you cannot see anything ... not even your hand in front of your face. It is a frightening feeling! Today in our sermon text, our Gospel reading, it talks about darkness and light. If you could have only one source of light, what would it be? Sunlight? No other light can match its beauty and intensity and the emotional satisfaction that light delivers. Or would you opt for the sparkling light of electricity? With this light you could see at all times, even at night when there is no sunlight. And you could use it to power computer and stovetop. Or would you choose the warming light that natural gas delivers? Which light would you choose if you could only have one? Before you come to a definite conclusion, think back to the words of our sermon text. There we heard about yet another light, a great light that blazed across Israel starting in the north of that country. Jesus is that light and we'll be reminded today why he is the best light, the one light that we dare not be without. For without Jesus, we will end up lost in everlasting darkness. **Jesus Is the Best Light!**

Our text from Matthew 4 describes what Jesus does when he finds out that John the Baptist had been put in prison by King Herod. Like a soldier who rushes to fill the gap when a comrade on the front lines takes a bullet and falls to the ground, Jesus stepped into the breach left by John's arrest. Jesus moved from the small town of Nazareth where he had spent most of his childhood to Capernaum which was on the Sea of Galilee. It was an intentional decision to fulfill a 700-year-old prophecy of Isaiah that went like this: **"Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death a light has dawned"** (Matthew 4:15, 16).

This area of Israel, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali named after the two tribes of Israel who had settled there, had a dark reputation. Since it was in the north, it was the first place that invading armies coming from that direction would hit. This area had become a doormat that powerful nations found easy to wipe their combat boots all over. I suppose it would be like living within sight of the Israeli/Palestinian border a few years ago; you never knew when a stray rocket or bullet would speed your way screaming "Death!"

But there was another darkness covering this land that was even more dangerous than the tip of a soldier's spear aimed at one's heart. Since this part of Israel had been overrun so many times by non-Jews, many of them started to settle there and brought their pagan religions with them. This influence, as well as the fact that the Israelites who still lived there were far from the temple in Jerusalem, had caused many to lose their faith in the one true God. They were lost in a spiritual darkness.

It was to this dark place that Jesus went and, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, it was as if a great light had dawned upon Zebulun and Naphtali. But exactly in what way was Jesus a light? Well, look at what he did. Our text says, **"From that time, Jesus began to preach: 'Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near'"** (Matthew 4:17). Jesus brought God's light through the message he delivered: "Repent! Turn away from your sins!"

Is this the message the world today wants to hear from Jesus? "Repent! Turn from sin!" Don't many say that what Jesus came to deliver was a message of peace and acceptance? "Hey everyone, just keep on doing what you've been doing, God's OK with it and so am I." No! Jesus came as a light to expose sin the way a flashlight shining under your bed will illuminate all the dust bunnies and who knows what other foul things have been hiding in the darkness there.

But we shouldn't think of Jesus like a flashlight that shines in your face to blind and embarrass. Matthew quoted the Isaiah prophecy saying that, with the arrival of Jesus, a great light had risen and was shining on the people in a way that is the kind of light your companion provides when he shines his flashlight down at your feet so you can avoid tripping over the roots and rocks on that midnight walk through the woods.

What are the roots and rocks that Jesus exposes for us with the light of his Word? With his comments about marriage, that it is to be between one man and one woman, Jesus makes clear that a homosexual lifestyle is not OK. By urging the woman caught in adultery to go and **"sin no more"** Jesus illuminates how sex outside of

marriage, even if it is between two consenting adults, is a sin that needs forgiveness. Jesus also points out that when I'm stingy with my money and my time it reveals how much I care for myself and how little I care for others. What makes this sin of greed so offensive is that at the root of it is my lack of trust in God's promise to provide for me. Jesus points out that we have no need to worry because our Father in heaven will always take care of us. And, yet, think how much we spend our life in worrying and fretting.

Considering what Jesus exposes, sin, sin, and more sin, it's surprising to hear what else Jesus said with his preaching. Matthew reports: "**Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom.**" (Matthew 4:23a). Jesus had not just come to throw a spotlight on sin; he also came to highlight God's love. He had good news for sinners to hear. And that good news wasn't, "If you clean up your act, God will forgive you." That's not good news. It's a recipe for more guilt because I cannot clean up my act to match God's standards any more than I can fix, scrub, and polish a rust covered beater-car with 300,000 miles on it to look brand new again. But Jesus' good news was this: he, the Son of God, had come to fix, scrub, and polish people who were guilty of committing well over 300,000 sins each. It would kill him to get it done. He would have to die on the cross. But he would do it, and gladly. He did it. He died for you to take your sins away. Yes, Jesus is a great light, the best light, the only light that leads to an eternal life of happiness in heaven.

We talked about darkness and light at the beginning of the sermon. Think of the light that shows that your computer modem is working correctly. Using the internet has become such a big part of our lives for getting and receiving emails and information. Imagine if your modem or router fails. It doesn't work. The light isn't on. You can't check your email. You can't find answers to questions you're used to finding with a few clicks of the mouse. It feels like you're cut off from the world. If you understand that pain, take that feeling and multiply it by infinity. That's what it will feel like to be cut off from Jesus come Judgment Day. For without Jesus lighting your life, you have lost the only connection to never-ending joy in heaven.

It might not seem like a big deal now to be without the light of Jesus. Life seems to go on whether or not you've had your daily devotion or your weekend worship. But a meaningful life cannot be had without the Savior. He's like that night light a parent puts in their child's room because he's afraid of the dark. That night light is that child's security. Jesus is ours. That thought was perhaps echoed in what Jesus said to his first disciples, that he would make them fishers of men, women, and children (Matthew 4:19). And that is what we are without Jesus, fish that aimlessly swim around with no seeming purpose. It's only when Jesus catches us with his Word and his love that we're of any use. Only then do we see that life is not about us but about serving him who died for us. And Jesus has caught us with his word, but he doesn't just throw us in the boat, he makes us part of his family, loved and cherished. Take to heart then these words of our sermon text today: a great light, the best light is now shining on you in the person of Jesus. Soak up that light of Jesus, his love and his forgiveness. Amen.