

“Light has Dawned”
Matthew 4:12-23
Sunday, January 23, 2011
United Methodist Church of Yucaipa
Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening

You’ve heard of Aesop’s fables. One of the fables is about an oil lamp that began to boast that it shone more brightly than the sun. Just then, a puff of wind blew it out. Someone lighted it again and said, “You just keep alight, and never mind the sun.”

Today’s scripture reminds us that light has dawned in the person of Jesus Christ. He is our Sun, shining brightly. At the same time, he is the Savior who relights our lamps when they get snuffed out by shifting winds.

In other words, Jesus is the Sun that shines eternally, brighter than we can ever hope to be. He is also the one who saves us from darkness and encourages us when the darkness seems to surround us.

I. Review of Biblical Text

Matthew, in the reading for today, quotes the prophet Isaiah: “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.”

This quotation is placed at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Matthew’s gospel. The beginning of Jesus’ ministry is a time of great personal darkness for Jesus – his cousin, John, has been arrested, and Jesus has just received the news.

He withdraws to Galilee – perhaps for reasons of personal safety. Certainly he is in grief and anguish over John’s imprisonment, which is very serious. Certainly he is concerned that the

authorities might come after him, too. There is a sense of foreboding; Jesus knows John is facing the likelihood of death. It is a personally dark and painful time when Jesus must have wrestled both with the anguish of his friend's situation and with his own future death.

Out of this darkness – looking death and evil and oppression square in the face – Jesus announces the kingdom. According to Matthew, in the midst of darkness, light has dawned. Jesus preaches to the people – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Many of you will remember the Dementors from the Harry Potter series. The Dementors are shadowy creatures of the night who soar through the skies and swoop down on unsuspecting people. Wizards and witches can see Dementors and, therefore, have a better chance of fighting them off. Muggles – or non-magical folks like you & me – cannot see the Dementors, but we feel their presence.

Dementors suck the joy out of the air. They cause a chill and a weight to descend on the unsuspecting Muggles. A vague feeling of heaviness and depression sets in. It's like the shadow of death is hovering all around them. And the Muggles blame themselves, because there is no visible, logical explanation for their deep sense of despair.

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He said it; we're supposed to believe it. But it's difficult, isn't it? It's a tall order.

It's a tall order to ask us to see the kingdom of heaven in a world that seems to be going to hell. It's a tall order to ask us to have hope when we are surrounded by despair. It's a tall order to ask us to believe that light has dawned when all around us is darkness.

I don't think you need to hear a litany of the world's darkness. You know it as well as I do – poverty, war, hunger, violence, death, oppression, hatred... I don't think I need to continue.

We could all add to this list just from reading the daily newspaper. For some of us, we can add to the list just by reflecting on our own lives at present.

There's a lot of dark out there, and not a whole lot of light.

II. The Dark and the Light

When Joshua was around 4 years old – Josh ok'd the telling of this story, by the way. When he was about 4 years old, one day in October Josh was watching the leaves falling from the trees. He had been learning about the seasons at preschool and he said, "It's fall, Momma! The leaves are falling, so it's fall!"

Then he paused for a moment. "I'm sad when the leaves are falling," he said.

It is a sad time of year as the leaves fall and the days grow shorter and the world grows dark and cold. We all comment to one another about how we hate to come home in the dark on those short winter nights.

In January we are in a time when the days are slowly beginning to get longer again. The longer days give us the feeling that light is dawning, that someday spring and summer will come again, even though it's hard to believe it in the middle of a cold dark winter. At least in Southern California we have these summer-like days now & then. Which is why folks like to vacation here in the winter. To escape the cold, snowy darkness of other parts of the country.

III. Believe in the Light

Jesus says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." We are to repent of our sins, certainly. But perhaps the greatest sin for which we must repent is that we believe in the dark more than we believe in the light. We despair so easily. We believe the power and the winning team is on the side of death and evil. We find it so difficult to believe in the light, to believe that Jesus has been victorious over sin and death.

And so today I call each one of us to repent of our belief in the power of darkness and to believe that light has dawned. Even though spring is not yet here, the days are getting longer and lighter. Even though the kingdom is not yet here in full, its light is permeating more and more of the darkness of our human existence. We, as Christ's church, are a part of this light that is dawning in the world.

Closing

In Rudyard Kipling's autobiographical book, Something of Myself, he tells how, after his marriage in 1892, he settled in a house that overlooked a wide valley in one of the loneliest stretches of New England. One spring day, he and his wife made a journey to the far side. They were greeted by a hatchet-faced woman who lived on an isolated farmstead.

"Be ye the new lights 'crost the valley yonder?" she asked them fiercely. "Ye don't know what a comfort they've been to me this winter. Ye aren't goin' to shroud 'em up – or are ye?"

As long as they lived there, Kipling said, the lights of their homestead were never "shrouded up." The memory of the meeting with their lonely neighbor was with them every time they lighted their lamps.

The hope and faith you radiate – however small your light – is a comfort to others who may feel lost and lonely in this world that is sometimes very dark.

Repent. Believe in the light which has dawned in the world. Reflect His glory as a beacon of hope for you and for others. Though we live in the darkness, yet we have seen a great light. The kingdom is coming. Repent. Believe in the light. Live in hope. Amen.