

Third Sunday after Epiphany

WHEN THE LIGHTS GO ON AGAIN!

Matthew 4:12-23

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Analysis by Norb E. Kabelitz

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 fishermen. 19 and he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for 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 Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Note: The old tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were the

first pieces of Israelite territory to be swallowed up by Tiglath Pileser III and reorganized as an Assyrian (Gentile) province ten years before the rest of Israel was subjugated in 722 B.C. Isaiah (742-687 B.C.) proclaimed that the first territories to feel God's wrath would also be the first to enjoy good news at the birth of the Messianic King (Isaiah 9:1-7). Those provinces are the fabric of Galilee! (See Jerome Bible Commentary and R.H. Smith, Matthew, Augsburg Commentary)

DIAGNOSIS: The Shadow-land of History's Stigma

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Humiliated by History and Society*

To live in Galilee as a Jew was to live in a land that had been smeared and vandalized by history, first by the Assyrians, then by the diversity of its population surrounded as it was and infiltrated as it had been by Gentiles so much so that even in Jesus' day the land was held in contempt by the ethnically "pure" Judeans of the south; hence, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? ... Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee" (John 7:41, 52). Or how about Nathanael's cynical comment, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). To live in Galilee automatically painted one as second class. To live in Galilee put you among northern people the Judeans in the south would rather forget. (Is the situation much different today with the presence of Palestinians in the eyes of Orthodox Judaism?) Or, could we compare it to the loss of prestige as "Christendom" in our pluralistic society? It may be useful to use a contemporary parable to define Isaiah's description of the Galilean human situation. How about the land of "misfit toys" from the "Rudolph , the Red Nosed Reindeer" epic? Of course, in deeper and more cosmic terms one can lean on Paul's analysis of the human situation that "Judeans" are not better off, for both

Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin" (Romans 3:9). So let your imagination find ways to apply this to our human situation. We have all become a "land of misfit toys."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Marginalized and Forgotten*

"Woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:10). When a former Vietnam prisoner of war was asked what his most difficult time was as a prisoner of war, he answered, "When I thought I had been forgotten!" Although this man had steeled himself to cope with all the indignities and humiliation of imprisonment, the fear of being forgotten was the major spiritual obstacle as he tried "seeking to make a lonely way amidst oppressions without a comforter." Our human situation in such a shadow-land suggests the description: "we were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). Why was it that Jesus was "rejected" at Nazareth? Had the "shadows" and graffiti of history made faith and hope difficult and impossible to comprehend? See Mt. 13:54-57: "He could do no mighty work there because of their unbelief." Have we succumbed to being in the shadows?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Isolated and Condemned*

With no access to "the promises," and ostracized because of suspicious "Galilean accents" (Acts 1, 2), even into the New Testament era, hundreds of years later, and far removed from the lights of the Holy City, (and from God), the people languish in the darkness and in the shadow of death. No message of hope has yet emerged in this misfit land. The Isaiah quote says people languish in "deep" darkness (Isaiah 9:2). It's Psalm 23's "Valley of the shadow of death." It is to experience the "wrath" of God in this shadow-land of the forgotten, the condemned, the

contemptible and the dying: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). Will Galilee be “delivered”? Are we like Galilee? Will we be delivered? Or vindicated?

PROGNOSIS: Epiphany of God’s Gracious Intervention

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Messianic Mission*

“From that time on Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near” (v. 17). That proclamation is tied to the Messianic mission described by Paul: “He rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his beloved son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13). The powerhouse for this “transfer” is the incarnate Lord who identified with the humiliated and marginalized, who is himself smeared by the human situation, rejected and crossed; but by that ministry he “makes glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations”(Isa. 9:1b). The “transfer” is made possible by his “crossing” into the shadow-land which finds its completion (“It is finished”) for us, not just in Good Friday, but in his resurrection as well.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Promise of “Nearness”*

This call to repentance invites a faithful response because of its nearness, personalized in Jesus: “I will make you fish for people!” The call to “make a U turn” is not related to personal sin and remorse, but to a turn around of who they had been because of history, and a new calling to be a light to the nations. Isn’t it remarkable that Jesus makes apostles from Galilee carry on the light! Galilee, degraded and despised becomes a fire-works display for change in world history! It is a change for the “better” because it is God’s way of creating a

new history for the world out of the debris and judgment of history. To hear such good news creates a new found faith that "follows."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Bearers of the Light*

"Follow me!" Chosen to be "lights in and to the world."
"Rejoicing as in joy at the fall harvest" (Isa. 9:3). We have a new calling that competes with our regular vocations. Our task is to share a faith that is exciting, different, and contagious. The kerygma, the preachment, is not moralistic advice and platitudes, ("be nice"), but dramatic good news: To preach the Gospel brings heaven's rule "near" to overcome the "darkness" (v. 16) and embarrassment of our human situation, so that we might be beneficiaries of God's intervention and saving power. It changes us from persons trapped in darkness and prejudice to persons of hope and light. While we may not be able or willing to repeat the "curing of every disease and every sickness among the people" as a sign of the kingdom (v . 23) we can teach and proclaim the "kingdom" that transfers us from something old, shadowed, and desperate, to something new, epiphanized, and hopeful that transfigures us and maybe even our world! Just do it!