

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany

January 30, 2011

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Isaiah 9:1-4

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan--The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. (NIV)

Go back with me to the days of the judges where we have one of my favorite Old Testament stories. For seven years God allowed the Israelites to be oppressed by the Midianites, nomads from Moab and Ammon. Whenever Israel planted their crops these invaders came and ruined them, and not only that, but along the way they killed all the Israelite livestock, not sparing any of their sheep or cattle or donkeys. These enemies abused them so much that they drove Israel into severe poverty. These were dark times for God's people and it looked as if it were about to get even darker. The Midianites joined forces with the Amalekites and others to create a very large and powerful army. They settled north and camped there ready to crush the Israelites. Their army is described as "*thick as locusts*" and "*their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore*" (**Judges 7**). As they were about to war against Israel you might describe the situation as bleak, hopeless, and dark.

Especially when we look at the army on the other side. It was lead by a judge God raised up named Gideon. He mustered up Israel's army and got them ready. But then the Lord said something surprising when He told Gideon that he had too many men. So Gideon announced at the Lord's command that anyone who was afraid, any fearful man may leave, and 22,000 soldiers were more than happy to take off. So only 10,000 men remained. But the Lord again told Gideon they had too big of an army so the Lord had him bring the men by the water and have them take a drink. Then the Lord had Gideon separate those who lapped the water with their hands from those who knelt down to drink. Gideon was ordered to take only those three hundred men that lapped the water with their hands and that was his army. That's it, three hundred men, against that mighty army of enemies whose camels could not even be counted!

Yet, I'm sure you know why this is one of my favorite stories. God miraculously saved Israel from the Midianites with just these three hundred men. He defeated all their enemies, soundly. A light shined brightly in Israel - the clear light of God's grace. No one could doubt that the victory was the Lord's - He did it. The Lord saved His people. The light of His love broke through the darkness when they did not deserve it. Don't you think there had to be much rejoicing, a celebration, an overflow of thanks and praise? The enemies who oppressed them were defeated.

Today, Isaiah talks about the Lord doing something even greater for Israel and for us. ***“For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.”*** May there also be rejoicing among us this morning. May we recognize that we have been given an even greater victory. May we see God's grace even more clearly. May we this morning see: **The Light that Shines in the Dark.**

The days of the judges were not the only dark days that Israel experienced. We know that other enemies oppressed them as well. In fact, a large Assyrian army and later a Babylonian army would trample and destroy and devastate God's people and their land. They would bring distress and gloom starting in the north in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali and it would not end until only a small remnant remained. Again, things did not look so good, but things looked bleak, hopeless, and dark.

Do things ever look that way for us? What enemies are you facing, what demons are you dealing with, what troubles are tormenting you? Are you struggling in your marriage or with other fractured relationships? Is there trouble at school or work? Are we saddened by our sicknesses or dreadful of disease? What problems exist for us at this time and place? I don't know what all your specific troubles are but I do know the cause of them all. I know why things so often look bleak, hopeless, and dark. I know why a thick darkness covers all people. It is same thing that caused the trouble in the day of the judges when everyone did as they saw fit. It is the same thing that brought God's wrath upon Israel in the form of Assyrian and later Babylonian armies. It is the same thing that causes every trouble, every trial, every sorrow and pain in our lives. Sin. Sin hangs like a dark cloud over us. It blinds us. It takes us down a dark path. It enslaves us and ruins us. Sin comes from the darkness of our hearts for: ***“out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander”*** (Matthew 15).

That is why Isaiah calls the people of Israel and us ***“a people walking in darkness”*** and a ***“people who live in the land of the shadow of death.”*** And the devil, our great enemy, likes us to think that it's great to live in the dark. He encourages us to gratify the cravings of our sinful natures. He lies to us and tells us to join the world in sin because that is where the fun it at. He wants to close our ears to the truth that the wages of sin is death. He wants to keep us blind and in the dark. The devil wants us to be lost with him forever in outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But God does not. So as His grace shone like a light in the day of Midian's defeat so it shines bright for us. ***“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”*** Isaiah tells us exactly where this light will first shine - in the very same place where God once allowed gloom and darkness. The northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, who were first trampled on by their enemies, will be honored. The Light will appear there by the sea of Galilee. And who set up the home base of His earthly ministry right there in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee? Our Gospel lesson today gives the answer away for us. In fact, Matthew quotes from this passage in Isaiah to tell us exactly what Isaiah meant here. Jesus is the light that shines in the dark. Jesus is the Light we have seen. Jesus is the light that has dawned on those living in the land of the shadow of death.

Jesus not only sticks out like a light shining in a dark place, but He came to give the light of life to all people. Jesus came to free us from darkness and take us out of the shadow of death. You and I know exactly what Jesus did to accomplish this. He went

into the dark and not just the fact He was born into this dark world of sin. But for three long hours on a cross on that Friday we call good, Jesus was enshrouded by a cloud of darkness none of us will ever comprehend. Jesus was trampled on by our enemies. Jesus was punished by our God. Jesus suffered the terror of outer darkness and paid the wages of our sin - death. Like it was for Gideon at Midian's defeat, so also Calvary is a complete victory that is the Lord's - He did it. On Easter morning the Light broke through the darkness to make it clear - Jesus has shattered "***the yoke that burdens (us), the bar across (our) shoulders, the rod of (our) oppressor.***" Sin, the devil, and even death itself have been defeated. Things will never be bleak, or hopeless, or dark again. Now we get to rejoice, celebrate, and be filled with joy as a people, an enlarged nation. We get to bring in the harvest that we did nothing to make grow. We get to enjoy the plunder of the victory we had nothing to do with at all. We get to rejoice in God's grace, His undeserved love for us that shines so clearly in Jesus. Jesus is the Light that shines in the dark.

Yet, before I say amen I also want us to take note on another light that Jesus gives to us that shines in the dark. We need it so badly because our feet often stumble in the darkness of our sins. We need it so desperately because troubles and trials appear around every corner in this dark world. We hunger for it more than we do food for our bodies and thirst for it more than a deer pants for water. This is the Word of God. This is the powerful Word that Jesus preached while He was here as the Light of the world. This is the Word that says to us again and again "***take heart your sins are forgiven.***" This is the Word that as Peter writes "***you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts***" (2 Peter 1). This is the Word that as the Psalmist reminds me is "***A lamp for my feet and a light for my path***"(119). This is the Word that shines clearly on Jesus who promises "***I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life***"(John 8). Amen.