

Good News! Light in the Darkness
Matt 4:12-17, Eph 5:8-10

Well friends, as we start the New Year - one of the things that we can look forward to is that the days are starting to get longer! Now I don't know about you... but I'm not a big fan of short days and long nights.

When the days are long and the nights are short it's easy to get up early and get going... but in December and early January when it's still dark out at 8am in the morning – I just want to hit the snooze button and go back to bed.

And when it gets dark at 4pm in the afternoon - it feels like its 8:30pm instead. You haven't even started your evening but the darkness just makes you sort of start to shut down... and you start thinking about turning in for the evening and it's hard to stay productive.

And the lack of light affects our emotional state as well. Many people suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder and they feel

depressed and unhappy during the winter because they are not getting enough sunlight.

So as we start the New Year, we can look forward to the days getting longer and having more daylight... and that's good news for our productivity and for those who suffer from S.A.D. and so you would agree that more light... is good news!

And I think it's important that we start the New Year looking for some good news, because 2016 has certainly has its share of bad news...

The most recent of which has been the sudden and unexpected passing of several musicians and actors – Alan Thicke, George Michel, Carrie Fischer, Debbie Reynolds...

They join a list of other famous people who passed away in 2016 – actress Zha Zha Gabour, golf legend Arnold Palmer, iconic musicians Prince, David Bowie and Lemmy - to name just a few...

2016 also saw Alberta suffer through the worst economic downturn in decades due to the continued drop in oil prices, and we've felt it keenly here in Calgary as thousands of people were put out of work.

Then there was the Fort Mac Murry wildfire, which forced thousands of people to evacuate and destroyed whole neighborhoods in that town.

And regardless of your political views, the recent election campaign in the United States has brought dirty election politicking to a new low and brought out the worst in people.

And I know that for a number of us at Valleyview – 2016 was a difficult year as well – whether it was sickness, financial problems, work challenges, relationship struggles, personal loss – there's been some hard times you've gone through – and I want to commend those of you who asked our prayer team to pray for you during those times.

So as we leave 2016 behind and move into 2017 and we wish everyone a happy and prosperous New Year – I think we are in need some of good news.

We need something to assure us that 2017 can be a better year, the kind of year that we wish for people, but not just because we're trying to be positive or we're just "talking big."

You know... those New Year's wishes about prosperity and success that are just way over the top.

I mean I've seen some that I would be scared to say to you – because if you don't have the most fabulous best year of your life and get your dream job, win the lottery and the Stanley Cup (and you don't even play hockey) - you are going to come back and sue me for false advertising...

So brothers and sisters instead of grandiose wishes, which likely won't live up to their hype – We need some real good news.

Like the simple but significant good news that we can look forward to more daylight in the coming months... which in some ways is very much like the good news in Mathew 4:16 that *“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light!”*

Brothers and sisters that’s Good news! It even sounds like good news.

You don’t have to know anything about the background information, the context in scripture, the original words in the Greek, or anything else to know that this sounds like good news.

People who are sitting in darkness have seen a great light!

We just know from our ordinary everyday experience that going from darkness to light is full of hope, full of promise; full of relief...

No one likes to stumble around in the darkness, bumping into things...

We get lost in the dark; the things we are afraid of lurk in the dark, darkness immobilizes us...

You can’t see in the dark and so you can’t do your work, or play, or read, or write when its dark...

So when we hear that *“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light”* we hear good news.

And the good news is that this good news gets even better.

If we do explore the context in the scripture and we look the background information and the original Greek words and so on... we will become enlightened about what great this light actually is and what it means for us!

So to start, this little bit of good news comes to us from Isaiah 9:2, and Mathew is quoting it to explain why Jesus has withdrawn to Capernaum when John the Baptist is put in prison.

Matthew writes *“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light; on those sitting in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”* (vs.15-16)

So - a quick lesson in bible geography; The Land of Zebulun and Naphtali are located north of where the Jordan River meets the Sea of Galilee.

That’s why Matthew says “by way of the sea, beyond the Jordan. This is the land what was given to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali when Israel entered the Promised Land.

Now, fast forward through the rest of the Old Testament up to the time of Jesus and the map of Israel has changed considerably.

Zebulun and Naphtali and the area west of the Sea of Galilee have become a puppet kingdom of the Roman Empire, ruled by King Herod Antipas.

So the region of Galilee – once set-apart as exclusive territory for some of God’s Covenant People - has now become a melting pot for people of all backgrounds and religions under foreign rule - it is Galilee of the Gentiles, as Mathew calls it.

And Matthew is saying that the people of this region have seen a great light because Jesus officially begins his ministry there – specifically in the town of Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

So this is where the background information helps us to see how this good news gets better.

The fact that Jesus starts his ministry as the long awaited, much anticipated Messiah in the remote northern regions where the Gentiles and Jews mixed freely - and not in Jerusalem - is good news.

Because prior to Jesus’ ministry to see the light of God you had to physically go to Jerusalem, to pray at the Temple, to be

instructed on how to observe the laws of the Mosaic Covenant.

For example in King Solomon's dedication prayer for the Temple he says "*As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land....—when they come and pray toward this temple...*" (2 Chron 6:32)

Before Jesus' ministry – to see the light of God - you had to go to Jerusalem.

Now don't get me wrong, the Mosaic Covenant and the Temple in Jerusalem were good news when they first started – but by the time Jesus arrived, the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law had got it so backwards and twisted up that it wasn't good news anymore – it was a legalistic burden, and the foreigners were not welcomed anymore either...

In fact the place where Gentiles could come and pray in the Temple courts had been appropriated for currency exchange and the sale of livestock for Jewish sacrifices.

So instead of setting himself up in Jerusalem – and expecting those who were far away - not only geographically but also religiously – to come to him... Jesus starts his ministry among them.

It is in Galilee where Jesus proclaims "*repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!*" (vs. 17) The people sitting in darkness have seen a great light!

So this good news is getting better because the light is drawing near to the people in darkness; the light is seeking them out.

And this background information helps us to distinguish that the light which the people are seeing is not the political and religious significance of Jerusalem; with its Temple worship and sacrifice and observance of all the laws as twisted by the religious leaders...

This light is the Holy Spirit empowered ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

And as Jesus calls the disciples, performs healings and miracles, casts out demons and teaches the people with authority, we see a Great Light driving back the spiritual darkness which has oppressed these people.

So this Great Light which the people have seen is also the Kingdom of Heaven, and it is driving back the Kingdom of Darkness! Amen!

I told you that the good news is that this good news just keeps on getting better and better...

And here's some more good news - it's not just the people in Galilee who saw a great light when Jesus started to minister among them – we have seen it too!

Because Jesus himself said *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* (John 8:12)

So... the people sitting in the darkness in the West Side of Calgary, in Springbank Hill and the surrounding communities have also seen a great light!

The scriptures tell us how Jesus healed people, cast out demons, did miracles and called people to turn away from the darkness and embrace the light of the Kingdom of Heaven – all those years ago...

But what is amazing about light, brothers and sisters, is how it can travel undiminished across time.

The light from a star may take tens of thousands of years to reach us, but shines as brightly as it did when it left that star.

So to the good news of Jesus Christ - the light of Jesus Christ's ministry as the Messiah - may have taken two thousand or so years to reach us through the scriptures - but it has not diminished it in any way over that time.

The light of Jesus Christ still shines as brightly as ever today when the name of Jesus Christ is proclaimed as good news.

Because friends - in Jesus' name your sins are forgiven!

Whatever you have done wrong – you can confess it to God and ask for forgiveness in the name of Jesus – and you will be forgiven of it.

It will not be held against you by God, and it can't be used against by Satan – because it is forgiven through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

In Jesus' name we have power to heal, to do miracles, to drive out demons and drive back the kingdom of darkness! Amen!

And for as rough of a year as 2016 has been, I know there have been instances where we have seen a great Light as work in people's lives when they have received provision, healing, deliverance and forgiveness – in Jesus' name.

And there is no doubt in my mind that we are only going to see more of this occurring in our lives and in the lives of people in this community in 2017 because *“the people walking in darkness have seen a great light!”*

Now, brothers and sisters – have you noticed that much of what people wish each other on New Year's and what they resolve to do in the coming year is actually related to the reality of experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven in their lives.

Listen carefully to these New Year's wishes... *“Another fresh new year is here, another year to live, to banish worry doubt and fear, to love and laugh and give”*

Or this one; *“For everybody in the world, whatever color their skin may be, whatever their religion may be, whatever their situation may be, good health, lots of love, of possibilities and peace.”*

What about this one; *“May this new year find you healthier and happier, peaceful, content, satisfied, looking forward to*

fresh, revitalizing interests, a variety of pleasures, interesting new people, material and personal successes to make this new year the best one yet.”

And don't forget the all resolutions that get made to eat right, exercise more, lose weight, stop smoking, stop drinking, spend less save more, and so on....

Friends - aren't these resolutions and wishes just describing what happens when people who are sitting in darkness see a great light?

Don't they simply describe what can happen when the Kingdom of Heaven draws near to us and we experience the power in the name of Jesus and are enabled to repent and turn away from darkness and live in the light?

That's why all we need as we start the New Year is the good news which says *“The people sitting in darkness have seen a great light!”*

This good news contains the power to transform us from darkness to light, that's the final way in which this good news gets better and its how it applies to us.

The Apostle Paul talks about this in his letter to the Ephesians, and He writes *“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light”* (vs. 5:8)

In other words the essence of who we were; used to be totally and completely affected by sin – darkness, but since God became a human being in Jesus Christ and was totally and completely unaffected by sin – through our relationship with Christ that has become is our reality as well.

So we live vicariously through Christ – we live as children of the light. Do you grasp the mechanics of how that works?

Good – but the problem is that just understanding it is not how you experience it. Simply knowing that we are made sinless in Christ does very little to help us experience any transformation from our sin in our day to day lives.

To experience transformation we need to expose the fruitless deeds of darkness that linger in us to the light of Christ as Paul instructs us to do in vs. 11 *“Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.”*

What happens next is described in vs. 13 *“everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.”*

Exposing our fruitless deeds of darkness is being honest about how we are still affected by sin as Christians. It’s confessing our sins to each other and to Christ, asking for forgiveness in Jesus name...

Exposing everything to the light is asking the Holy Spirit to reveal hurts in us that need to be healed, relationships which need to be made right, lies we’ve believed that need to be replaced with the truth...

When we expose these areas that we usually try to keep hidden in the dark to the light of Christ transformation happens to them – to us...

Just like the moon is a chunk of lifeless rock that gives no light of its own, when the light of the sun hits it is transformed into a light – reflecting the light of day into the night.

Friends may this be the year when the good news that *“those who are sitting in darkness have seen a great light”* means that the light of Christ shines on our lingering darkness... whatever those dark shadows may be; bitterness, unforgiveness, anger, hurt, lust, pride...

Not to embarrass us, but to transform us, to undo the ways in which the residue of sin still twists and warps us and to make us whole again – making what we wish for each New Year a reality in our lives.

So brothers and sisters, if you are thinking about making a resolution this year – think about how you expose your own darkness to light?

Maybe that is by coming and speaking with your pastor, maybe it is opening up to your brother and sisters in your Christ Care Group, maybe a trusted Christian friend – maybe it is journaling before God with raw and explicit honesty...

But decide and resolve to do something to bring your darkness into the light in 2017 – and tell someone what you've decided to do.

So friends, as 2017 begins I said that we can look forward to more light – and yes the days are getting longer – but I also know that here at Valleyview the light of Christ is growing stronger and it will continue to grow stronger as we expose our darkness to light so it becomes light.

So hear and believe the good news at the beginning of this year brothers and sister – *the people sitting in darkness have seen a great light!*

Amen.