

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 4:30pm 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... which is good for our productivity and for those who suffer from S.A.D. and so I think we 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 2020 has certainly has its share of bad news...

So much so that I don't even need to go into much detail about it – which is very telling... because normally when I do a year in review message, I actually have to do a bit of research to look up which negative events which occurred in any given year because whatever it is has concluded or I've forgotten about it by the time the year wraps us.

But... that's not the case this year.

And... whatever economic, political, or personal challenges that we've been facing in Alberta have only been exacerbated by our pandemic circumstances, and that has been true in other parts of the world as well, especially south of the border.

Again – very telling that I don't need to go into detail about what I'm referring to there either.

So, as we leave 2020 behind and move into 2021 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 2021 can indeed be a better year, the kind of year that we know people really need, and not just because we're trying to be positive or we're just “talking big” with our New Year's wishes.

You know... those New Year's wishes and statements 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...

Isn't it ironic when you think back to this time last year about how we were wishing each other a terrific new year, and people were talking about making 2020 their best year ever!!

Ummm – ya, how did that work out for us so far?

So brothers and sisters instead of offering each other grandiose wishes, which likely won't live up to their hype – and making statements that about how 2021 is going to be so much better because we think 2020 is as bad as it could get... has reminded us, we ought to focus on some real good news that we can be certain about.

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 the statement *“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light”* we hear it as good news. And in fact many are using this same metaphor of light to talk about the good news of how vaccines can bring us out of these pandemic circumstances.

And the good news is that this good news about light from the scriptures gets even better.

If we actually take the time explore the biblical context 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 – and its so much more than the hope that a vaccine will help us get back to normal again.

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 our sins are forgiven!

We might think that 2020 and our pandemic circumstances are our most pressing problem – but brothers and sisters they have only more clearly revealed it. Our most urgent issue is our sinfulness brothers and sisters, and that should be clearer than ever to us at the close of this year.

But the good news, the light in the darkness is that 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.

And out of that grace and mercy in Jesus' name we are gifted by the Holy Spirit with power to heal, to do miracles, to drive

out demons and drive back the kingdom of darkness – and bring light to others! Amen!

And as terrible has 2020 has been, we know there have been instances where we have seen a great light at work in people's lives when they have received provision, healing, deliverance and forgiveness... and we have been able to bless them 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 2021 because the scripture tells us *“the people walking in darkness have seen a great light!”*

Now, brothers and sisters – if you listen carefully to what people will wish each other on New Year's and the resolutions they make for the coming year are actually related to the desire that we all have to experience the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven in their lives – even if we don't know it!

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....

Brothers and sisters – can you hear it?

Can you see how these resolutions and wishes are describing in concrete and practical ways the things which happen when people who are sitting in darkness see a great light?

Don't they 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?

So, the truth is, all we really need as we start the New Year is to hear and share 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, and that's the final way in which this good news gets better and its how it applies to us now and in the coming year.

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 this has become our reality as well.

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

Good – but remember that just mentally understanding is not the fullness of how you experience it in your day to day life.

Simply knowing the information that we are made sinless in Christ does very little to help us experience transformation from our sin in our day to day lives.

To experience transformation, we need to act 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.”*

In the same way that knowing a vaccine is available might make us feel hopeful – but that doesn’t actually change anything in our immune system like getting the vaccine would.

We need a bit of a “light vaticination” as 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 affected by sin. It’s confessing our sins to each other and to Christ, asking him for forgiveness.

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 - then 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.

So brothers and sisters may this be the year when the good news that “*those who are sitting in darkness have seen a great light*” means the light of Christ will shine that whatever sinfulness has been exposed by pandemic, whatever those dark shadows may be; fear, rebelliousness, conspiracy, doubt, anger, greed, self-righteousness...

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 is so often wished for every New Year, a growing reality in our lives.

And so brothers and sisters, as you have passed along your New Year’s wishes to others and as you are thinking about your own hopes and resolutions for 2021 – may I suggest that you resolve to expose your own darkness to the 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 make a resolution to do something to bring your darkness into the light in 2021 – and tell someone what you’ve decided to do so that you might encourage them to do something that would help to actually bring about all the amazing stuff you’ve wished for them.

So brothers and sisters as 2021 begins, let us look forward to more light – because not only are the days getting longer – but I also know that here at Valleyview the light of Christ is growing stronger! And it will continue to grow stronger and become even brighter 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.