

EPIPHANY 3, Jan. 22, 2017, Year A

"The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." (from Matthew 4:12-23)

- God's prophet Isaiah offers *these words* to us this morning: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined."¹ (pause) I want to share with you why I have had a difficult time, this past week, living into the fullness of these words.
- About two weeks ago, I received a phone call late one evening from someone for whom I care. The caller asked if I was still up, and if I could speak with him. He then shared with me how he had received some unwelcome news. During a routine sonogram for his child due to be born in June, he told me that he had learned two things. The baby was a *she*, but, that she also had a *very serious* deformity. In the following days, further tests had confirmed the initial diagnosis, as well as the strong likelihood of problematic additional impairments. As a result of their physician's counsel, he and his wife began to follow through on their doctor's recommendations.
- As a concerned priest not immediately involved in this couple's situation, I was able to benefit from talking with two physician friends, one here in Grand Rapids, and another who is a professional colleague in the national church. Both were incredibly sensitive about this yet-to-be-born baby's condition. And both physicians confirmed my apprehension that *the baby's condition would not just be life-altering, but that it would be life-ending*. My physician friend from another state said something on the phone that stopped me in my tracks. She said, "*remember, Stephen, that death is not the worst thing that can happen.*" This week, I had the opportunity to ponder and experience the deeper significance of her words.
- I wrestled with whether I should share this news with you. *Good reasons for not doing so* include respecting appropriate personal 'boundaries.' While hoping to honor this principle by respecting personal privacy, and at the risk of having you wonder who in this community may be the family involved, I have decided to speak *candidly* with you this morning. I believe *it's important for you to hear me tell you how, as a fellow-baptized member of the Church, I have thought*

quite a bit about a path that some of you may have had to walk, yourselves, perhaps even personally. For this involves the challenge of *accepting* something difficult, that we *cannot* change - a challenge that we all, in one way or another often face.

- *If you've walked this path, you can guess that my caller and his wider family have at times felt like they have been walking in darkness.* Darkness, in various forms, has seemed to *surround all of us*. As people of faith, the obvious challenge for us has been *to try to hear in a new way, and then live into, the words of Isaiah*. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy..."² *What*, my friends, does it mean for us *to have seen great light?* *What*, especially in circumstances like the one I describe, would it mean *to believe that God has "multiplied the nation"* and *"have increased its joy?"* *And how*, in the midst of such circumstances, *can we be witnesses to our faith* with our friends and family, as well as with our parish community?
- One of my own starting points for wrestling with these questions has been *to reflect on what it means to see a great light*. Scientists tell us that seeing depends upon light. For without light, there is nothing for our eyes physically to see. I know that I have seen many remarkable things in my life. Some—like the Grand Canyon—have been physical and geographical; others—like the northern lights—have been of an astronomical kind. Still others have been spiritual or even mystical. But, *in each of these instances, to have seen something real, did not always mean I took it seriously, or embraced it in a life-changing way*. A great sight, even a *new light*, *may be* revealed to us. But we don't necessarily respond with *commitment* and *resolve*. And so, the Lord may well have revealed a great light to people who walk in darkness. But *not all us*, starting with me, have responded with the words of our Psalm. *Not all of us are prepared to say, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; who then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom [or what] shall I then be afraid?"*³

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- Matthew tells us boldly that Jesus' arrival in Galilee truly fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy. Matthew says that, *"for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned."*⁴ The most important insight we can gain from these words depends on our considered appreciation for Matthew and Isaiah's message. Both the prophet and the Evangelist recognize and acknowledge *the difficult actuality of our daily circumstances*. At least from time to time, *many of us* have sat in darkness, and felt we have been in the region and shadow of death. Yet, both Matthew and Isaiah *insist* on affirming that, *regardless*, *a new light has truly dawned on us.*⁵
- And so, yes, *we can say that we have seen a new light*. But, this past week, like *the parents in the family I have in mind, I haven't been quite ready to allow my heart to rest upon that light*. Some words from our Gospel have helped me with this. Matthew tells us that, from the time when Jesus moved to Galilee, he "began to proclaim, *'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*" That word "repent" has become so familiar to us, we don't really grasp its significance. If so, please consider this concrete metaphor.
- I have noticed that most electrical devices with any degree of sophistication, have *a 're-set' switch*. Our relatively simply vacuum cleaner has a reset button. But so does my iPad, as well as my laptop. And we depend upon the fact that, *if we really mess up our electronic devices, we can hit 'the reset,'* which will *return* them to factory condition, or something close to it. This mundane example provides us with an important spiritual metaphor. What Jesus proclaimed to the people of his time, remains a message of *great hope* for us. *God offers us a dramatic and spiritual re-set opportunity*. It applies to us no matter how much *we may have messed up our basic 'operating system,'* or whether we are simply *flagging in our faith and hope*. Repentance, and the act of intentionally remembering our Baptism, offer us much-needed opportunities for a *re-set*.
- *To repent, is spiritually to hit our provided reset button*. Personally, coming from a line of stubborn Swedes, this is *not easy* for me to do. Though my own *particular* temperament has challenged me this week, there is something

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deeper, and *common to everyone*, which makes hitting the reset button especially difficult *for all of us!* **It is pride**, that ancient root of all sins. **It is the greatest obstacle to experiencing grace.**⁶ Pride keeps us from seeing the big picture, from perceiving events as God would have us look at them, and from resting upon God in the process.

- Our Psalm this morning provides an *escape from pride*. All we really need to do is *rely* upon these words, and *live* into them:

"One thing have I asked of the Lord;
one thing I seek; *
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life;

To behold the fair beauty of the Lord *
and to seek him in his temple.

For in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe in his shelter; *
he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling
and set me high upon a rock."⁷

- And the rock upon which he will set me, is the Rock of Peter. It is the rock of Mary and of the disciples who joined Peter. **It is the rock of the whole Church, which witnesses to the great light we have seen, and which we have personally known.**

[NOTE: this text has been edited further to respect the privacy of the persons involved in the pastoral situation to which I make reference in it.]

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John Entwistle (Vancouver, BC, photographer), *Night View from Cypress Mountain*, 2016 / an image that fits well with:
"The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light" (Mt 4:16) [A new moon is a sign of promise!]

Matthew 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
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.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

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. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

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.

Notes:

¹ See Isaiah 9:1-4, which is quoted again, further below.

² It is worth noting that Isaiah 9 continues with the oft-quoted words predicting the birth of a child, who will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” See Isaiah 9:6-7.

³ Psalm 27:1, with an interpolation; (emph. added).

⁴ See Matthew 4:12ff; (emph. added).

⁵ To pick up on Matthew’s version of the words.

⁶ Thank God it is not necessarily an obstacle to *receiving* grace. Pride amounts to thinking, “I know better than God’s Providential ordering of things, what is good for me and my loved ones!”

⁷ Psalm 27:5-7.