

Scripture and Sermon for January 22, 2017

Isaiah 9:1-4

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

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;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Matthew 4:12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, 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 lake—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.

Let us pray...Amen.

Careful listeners of today's scripture will notice that our Hebrew scripture seems to predict our gospel lesson, or, our gospel lesson fulfills what our Hebrew scripture predicts. I'm not sure which is which, or if it's even important to decide. Matthew says Jesus moved so that what had been spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

What *is* important is that the ministry of Jesus had begun. The torch that was lighted by John the Baptist had been passed to Jesus: the message to 'repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near' became a great light for the people who sit in great darkness.

Matthew tells us that John had been arrested, and that upon hearing the news, Jesus withdrew to the wilderness of Galilee. This backwater town of Gentiles is where Jesus would begin his ministry. His whole ministry, all three years of teaching, preaching, and healing, occurred in an area less than 50 square miles.

As I was preparing for this sermon, I got to thinking about some of the imagery that popped into my head: passing the torch, from John to Jesus. It reminded me of a relay race. Has anyone ever run in a relay race? 4 runners each race a portion of the distance, passing a baton between each other. If the baton is dropped, then for that team, the race is over.

I also thought of the Olympic torch, carried from Greece to whichever site is hosting the Olympics in an Olympic year.

Or the reality TV show, Survivor, your torch represents life in the game: when your torch is extinguished, your life in the game is over, and you leave.

So the one who came before Jesus, the one who prepared the way of the Lord, preached a message of repentance. The one who baptized with water, the one who baptized Jesus, taught his followers to live a life worthy of repentance. And when he was arrested, and could no longer carry the torch, or message, Jesus took the torch, and carried it himself. He became the great light for the people in darkness.

In fact, Jesus remains the light of the world, even in the darkest of places. In spite of his death, his resurrection means that he continues to be a great light for all of us, and he continues to carry the torch for us.

But an interesting thing happens when we hear the good news of God's Word in scripture: the torch gets handed to us.

It's true. Upon hearing the good news, the Word of God is handed to us, like a torch, like a baton, and it becomes our turn to run a leg of the race. We can accept it, and run with it, which is the hope and prayer of our Lord and Savior, or we can reject it. We can drop it and refuse to accept the message.

In a relay race, each runner has a specific job. The first runner has to establish the lead, giving room for the second runner to receive the baton. The second runner is supposed to stretch the lead, or at least keep the lead they received. Sometimes the second runner is a stronger runner, and they are able to advance the lead. The third runner is traditionally the weakest runner. There is no shame in being the third runner, it's just a fact that in a team of 4 runners, the third leg will usually be the slowest runner. If they can maintain the lead, great. But it's usually expected that they will lose

some ground on the third leg. Most important is that they don't drop the baton. Losing ground in the race is acceptable, dropping the baton is not. The fourth runner is usually the best, or fastest runner on the team. Their job is to either take the lead home and win the race, or make up for any lost time that has occurred during the race.

John the Baptist was the first runner. Jesus was the second runner. We are the third leg of the relay race of faith. Though we may be the slowest runners of the race, our job is to not drop the baton. Even if we lose some ground, we must preserve the baton so that we have something to hand off to Jesus when he returns.

See, in this relay, Jesus will run the anchor leg too. He will take the baton from us upon his return, and help us win the race. The torch, or baton was passed between John and Jesus, now Jesus to us. We are running the third leg of the race, and the baton is in our hands. Bet you didn't wake up today thinking you were going to be in a relay race, did you?

The baton we carry is the good news of the gospel: that the light of the world takes away the darkness, if we would only follow. If we can advance our lead on darkness, great. It would be expected that we might lose some ground to the darkness, given the theory of relay racing, but it would be unacceptable for us to drop the baton.

All we need to do is preserve the message, preserve the light, carry the baton, until Jesus comes to run the final leg of the race. Can we do that? Can we receive the hand-off cleanly, run the race to the best of our ability, and then give the baton to Jesus for the anchor leg of the race?

All these track metaphors to describe our faith lives! I apologize. In the third leg of our relay race of faith, we receive the light, and we pass the light on.

Our job is to share the light whenever and wherever we can. We don't have to be in top shape as runners, we just have to pass the light the best way we know how.

By forgiving others when it's the last thing we want to do. By being patient in those moments when we would rather lose our temper. By having compassion for those in difficult circumstances, when we want to blame them for their own troubles. By listening when we want to speak. By speaking when we would feel more comfortable listening.

What does carrying the baton, carrying the torch for the third leg of our faith race look like? It looks like generosity in the midst of financial fears. It looks like sacrifice in the midst of insecurity. It means standing out when all we want to do is remain invisible. It means being quiet when we think we must speak.

I can't tell you if the Kingdom of Heaven is any nearer than it was when Jesus took up the baton from John the Baptist. I can't tell you if it is any nearer than it was when Jesus handed us the baton at his ascension to heaven. But if we live lives worthy of repentance, if we carry the baton, the torch, with faith and firm resolve, if we take the light of the world seriously, then even if we've lost some ground to the darkness, we will be in good shape to hand off that baton to Jesus when he comes again.

When will our leg be over? When will Jesus come to receive the baton from us? I can't tell you that, either. We just have to run the race to the best of our ability, just put our heads down and run, holding tightly to the baton of faith, the torch of righteousness.

Each of us of course, has our own race to run, even as we are running together in this third leg.

It would be good for each of us to reflect on what we must do with the good news, how we must follow the light of the world, what response we will have to the Word of God, all the while holding tightly to the baton that was given to us in good faith and confidence.

Ready? Go!

Amen.