

**Highland Presbyterian Church**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – January 22, 2022**  
**“God is With Us”**  
**A sermon by Megan McCarty**

Matthew 4:12-23

Isaiah 9:1-4

If you have been attending here for any length of time, you have probably started to get a sense of how I like to write my sermons. I love to include a lot of history and background of what was happening around the writing of the text because those pieces are interesting to the Biblical nerd in me, they place the story in a certain context and allow us to be drawn into the Bible more fully. I also do this because the spirit of Kevin Burn continues to shine brightly around here and I still worry about disappointing him.

So, as you can imagine, today's scripture is no exception. There is a lot of history in this Isaiah passage that allows us to fully understand just what it means to be a people who are in anguish; to be someone who walks in darkness. The passage right before the start of chapter 9 is a prophecy of impending judgment, stating that nations will be shattered by war and warning of an Assyrian invasion. The prophet announces a period of distress, gloom, and thick darkness that will befall the people. Hunger will fill the people and they will be enraged and curse their king and gods; in their despair they will forsake the instruction of the Lord.

Where we pick up chapter 9 today then acknowledges this “former time” of deep darkness in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali; the land beyond the Jordan and Galilee. In the time between these two chapters, we know that the lands it mentions were conquered by the Assyrian king and all their citizens were deported to Assyria in 732 BCE. Gloom and darkness signify the devastation to the land and the people’s experience of military defeat. In these conditions, hunger and depopulation were ever present challenges facing the people.

It can be said that the biblical prophets are survival literature of war-torn communities, and this would certainly not be an exception to that. Just this week, I heard numerous stories about the war happening in Ukraine, as I’m sure you did, too. One story remarked that Russia is using winter as their weapon. They are intentionally destroying civilian infrastructure that provides heat and light to the Ukrainian people during the coldest, darkest part of the year. The people in Ukraine are starving, freezing, and have intentionally been cut off from one another. This is the type of gloom and anguish that Isaiah is talking about when he speaks of a people who have walked in darkness. This is the level of trauma, suffering, and desolation experienced by those who were conquered. And this is why the in-breaking of God’s light to this people feels like a reason to celebrate.

We are currently in the season of Epiphany, which appropriately falls in January, during winter in our hemisphere, before spring has arrived and the days have lengthened... it reminds the people of God that we live according to a different clock. Epiphany is a reminder of the idea that God is always with us, breaking once again into human history. In this time, we acknowledge God’s inbreaking through Jesus Christ and we remind ourselves, that the false,

worldly powers of success, productivity, dominance, and self-reliance do not have the last word.

Darkness and light provide images of the pattern of God's inbreaking and our recognition of it. The image of light was central throughout Advent, as we await the coming of the Light, the Christ Child, all while the days continued to shorten in the long winter darkness. We light Advent candles in anticipation of God's inbreaking through light. And now, in Epiphany, we celebrate the wise ones who followed the light of a star to the manger, and thereby, recognized the Christ Child.

Darkness and light describe human recognition of the inbreaking of God in Hebrew Scripture well before we get to the prophet Isaiah. You can go all the way back to Genesis 1 with the inbreaking of God into the formless void saying, "Let there be light." Light is evidence of God's creative work. And in the Old Testament, light is a metaphor that is often used to describe the rule of a righteous king. Justice and divine protection are characteristics of such a reign. The prophet declares that this people who were once in darkness will see a great light. The oppressive rule of Assyria will give way to justice and the restoration of peace. The idea of light overcoming darkness signals the inbreaking of God's reign, a divine rule that signals both the end of an oppressive rule and the deliverance for the people of God.

The Book of Isaiah is infamously complex, which makes it more interesting, in my opinion! Scholarship generally agrees that the complete book is the work of at least three—and likely more—authors and editors. So, determining the primary historical context for any given portion is usually a challenge. Because this passage lists specific places, there's some agreement about what war this passage is talking about. But as we just heard, Matthew quotes this story and attributes Jesus as the light that will be brought to this land of Galilee through his ministry as a fisher of men. That's what is incredible about this book and its ability to speak across history and time. Isaiah speaks of an enduring light that liberates us from the "dark" in all times and spaces.

As we live into the season of Epiphany and hear this text in our space, in our time, I wonder what it brings up for you. What is the personal darkness that you are walking through? Where have you seen the great light of God break into your life and your circumstances? Where does our society or our community need the inbreaking of God right now?

The other thing that you all know about me if you have been attending here for very long is that my family has undergone a long season of darkness. We shared with you all about my father-in-law's heroic yet ultimately deadly battle with leukemia, and we shared the news of the stillbirth of our daughter Mia. It was important for me to be transparent and vulnerable with you all about my life because each of you give me that same privilege into your lives. As I look around this room, I know some of the darkness that each of you find yourselves in. And I know some of the amazing places where we also see the dawn appearing.

We are stuck in the already and not yet reality in which Jesus has come, the light has dawned, and we're still just as surrounded by war and struggle as we were in Isaiah. As Christians, we believe that everything will be made right in the end. We believe that the darkness does not have the last word. But we are currently living half in the shadows and half in the light. And as you all know too well, some days can feel much darker than others.

It is a great privilege to walk alongside each of you in these moments. But what is even more important, is that you share these moments with each other. This community needs to be the one place in your life that you don't have to have it all together. It needs to be the place you can turn when you are reeling from bad news, or you just need a little extra support. We are the ones charged with shaping this community and creating it to be what we want it to be.

As God's light, Jesus shows us how to care for one another and can help us see more clearly who we are and what we need. We don't have to live in the shadows when we come here. This is the one place that we know we are truly loved, just as we are. Through our personal darkest moments as a family, it has been this community that brought in light. You listened when we were ready to talk, you shared your personal experiences and stories, you grieved alongside us, brought food, surrounded our family with prayer, and provided us with so much grace.

The pain and struggles that we face in this world will not go away. Being of this world means that we are solidly in this world. Being a part of this community does not mean that we are immune to the darkness. But it does mean that we get to be light bearers for one another. The same bright light of Christ that originally drew us into this community of believers is also too bright to keep to ourselves. We are not meant to be a light bearer on our own and in fact, it becomes impossibly frustrating to try and do it all alone. We are created to be in community with one another and once we encounter Christ, we are called to be shaped and changed in order to lighten the burden for each other, to listen and heal, to accept and love one another, to speak the truth in love, and bring about peace.

A first step to creating this community is being vulnerable and transparent with each other. But it not just a matter of that transparency. Because we are creating a space where this vulnerability is acceptable and encouraged, we don't have to hide who we are. We are loved and brought into the light as our whole selves, and when we do this, we encounter a place of healing and wholeness for ourselves and the whole world.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. God is with us always and God's light is breaking in all around us. So, let us take the time to see that light and share it with all those we encounter and rejoice. Amen.