

Prayer of the Day:

Almighty God, you sent your son to proclaim your kingdom and to teach with authority. Anoint us with the power of your Spirit that we, too, may bring good news to the afflicted, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captive; through Jesus Christ, your son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. Jesus went through Galilee, teaching, preaching and healing every disease. Alleluia. (Matthew 4:23 cf. NIV)

Sermon Text:

What happens when you take away the light? Total isolation in a pitch-black room is actually a form of torture. So, go figure, we've studied it as a society. People willingly submitting to going without light or human contact for days on end. I know, there are probably a few people who are thinking it sounds like a good vacation opportunity, but apparently the mind can't take it. People report losing all track of time and purpose and then begin to imagine things, irrational fears sweep over them and hallucinations set in.

I came across one study where one of the subjects reported seeing an army of squirrels marching in lock step formation across their room and while he knew it was an impossibility, he had a hard time convincing himself it really wasn't happening there in the darkness. Some people even lost their spatial orientation and at the completion of the study were unable to stand upright or walk without assistance. It's odd stuff, but apparently, God wired us to depend on light in our everyday lives and without it, well things get really weird really quickly. Today in our Gospel Lesson, Jesus talks about darkness and light as He quotes our Old Testament Lesson and then He reminds us that living in that light means something in our everyday existence.

As our lesson opens, things look anything but bright and shiny. Matthew has our lesson follow on the heels of Jesus temptation in the desert, but John tells us some time has elapsed in between the two. In that time, considerable opposition has come to Jesus and John. Jesus has

Text: Matthew 4:12-23 (NIV84)

12 When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. 13 Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— 14 to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: 15 “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - 16 the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” 17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” 18 As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 19 “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” 20 At once they left their nets and followed him. 21 Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, 22 and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. 23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

been rejected in Nazareth and John as our lesson states is now in prison. As Jesus heads out to the outlying territories, more popular among the outcasts and Gentiles, the Scriptures are fulfilled. *“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”*

Just like that one of the themes of Epiphany sounds, Jesus is for everyone, both Jew and Gentile. All are in the light. As Jesus does His saving work in this world it is not only for one race, one generation, or one sex, but for you, for me, for all. Yes, even as the world lives in the delusions of its darkness, a light has dawned and this light changes everything.

Matthew goes onto tell us that while in the area Jesus preached. Imagine, the Word of God opened His mouth to teach and what came out? It was familiar, though it had earned its previous proclaimer the prison cell he now occupied, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”* In other words, **YOU LIVE IN THE LIGHT! DON’T STUMBLE AROUND IN THE DARKNESS!**

When I looked at those studies on light deprivation the comments of the guy who saw the squirrels were interesting. He understood it couldn’t be happening. He knew that things like this didn’t occur. But he struggled to remove the hallucination from the realm of reality. What a picture of the darkness of sin. We know better. We’ve studied the commandments of God and have followed the logical progression of why God says “no” and why He says “yes”. But in the darkness of the world around us, in the darkness of our own sinful natures, we struggle to separate the lies of Satan, from the reality which we have learned.

This is why Jesus repeats the words of John, really the Words of God, Jesus’ words for sinful humanity ever since the fall into sin. The very first of the 95 theses reads, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” He intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.” I believe it was also Luther who once called repentance “the very air we breathe as people of God.”

Repentance has generally been spoken of as having two senses: one broad and the other narrow. Narrowly defined it is a heartfelt sorrow or even a terror (as our Lutheran Confessions speak of it) over sin. This can only happen when the light of God’s Law shines upon the darkness of our sinfulness. Imagine the young child who against the warnings of their parents chose to take the cookie from the jar. They bought into the hallucinations of the darkness that they would get away unnoticed. But mom and dad, ever vigilant, caught the thief red-handed and crumb coated. Terror stricken, the tears begin to flow, the hallucination shattered, sin seen clearly in the fear of the punishment yet to be doled out. This is everyone of us as we buy into the hallucinations of our sinfulness caused by the darkness in which we live.

Ah, but then there is light! The broader sense of repentance as we speak of it consists of this terror over sin but it also includes a turning. A turning away from our wickedness and towards the only one who can offer forgiveness. It’s contrition and faith in Jesus Christ and all He has done for us. As Jesus is walking around the area teaching and preaching, we are told He finds Simon Peter and Andrew. What does He say? *“Come, follow me,”*

Our second lesson sheds light on this statement little bit. We can follow all kinds of things in this world, some good and some bad. We can even twist that which is good (faithful teachers and preachers there in 1 Corinthians) into that which is bad, allowing it to divide the unity of the church as we set up idols in the shape of mere men. The darkness it turns out is pervasive.

Of course, in our lesson today Jesus offers us the true and proper path as we navigate the darkness of the world around us. He is the light. In fact, in John chapter 8 He says, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*"

This is why the broad sense of repentance is so important as it connects contrition with faith in Christ. We aren't simply stumbling around in the darkness of sin feeling terrible about it, but can live in the light of forgiveness purchased and won by our Savior Jesus. Remember last week? John cried out, "*Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29)." And so He has. Light personified, He follows the will of God without fault. Perfectly exposing the deeds of darkness even as He avoids their traps and snares. He comes to defeat sin and death and devil that those living in their shadow may see His perfect sacrifice on the cross and know that nothing can overcome us. They have been defeated. In His resurrection, the truth that we follow Christ all the way into heaven, our true and lasting home away from the delusions of this world, away from sin and its consequences forever.

That truth of course, changes things. We no longer live in darkness. We live in light! With Jesus brightly shining beside us we can identify the stumbling blocks and snares. We can run to Him when we stumble and fall. We can hold out that light for others to see. Yes, Jesus says that He will make Peter and Andrew "fishers of men." Another theme of Epiphany, we'll save for another time. But it all happens as we illuminated by the light of our Savior Jesus and through His gift of faith no longer dive back into the darkness of sin but chase after the light. Listening to the Word, study it in our lives, yes, listening to Jesus as He proclaims His precious truth for us and for our salvation.

What happens when you take away the light? Apparently, the human mind crumbles into madness and delusion, as it buys into whatever whim or fancy pops into it. Thanks be to God we do not need to live like that. Because our Savior has come into the world, **YOU LIVE IN THE LIGHT!** There is no longer any reason to stumble around in the darkness of sin. God has called you to Chase after Jesus! Amen.