

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Epiphany, 2014
Matthew 4:13-17ⁱ

Part I

We live in a community that is made up of a lot of ethnic people. One way to get a flavor the different ethnic people in our community is to do a search of Portland area restaurants on the web. If you do, you will come up with a variety of them.

For example, there is the Rhinelander. Horst Mager, a German immigrant, opened it in the early 60's. He wanted to create an authentic German experience with singing servers and old world charm.ⁱⁱ Downtown Portland is the Andina. Doris Rodriguiz de Platt, a Peruvian immigrant, owns and operates the Andina. The dishes and flavors are distinctively Peruvian as well as its music and art.ⁱⁱⁱ Right here in Gresham is a restaurant called, Selmas. Its owners are Syrian Christians. They specialize in Middle Eastern food.

Of course, these are just a few examples of the ethnic people represented in Portland's restaurants. I'm sure you can think of many more. The point is, people from all over the world make their homes in the Portland area.

Capernaum was a bit like that. Capernaum was a stretch from the capitol city, Jerusalem. It lay to the north a ways and a bit to the east on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Located on the sea, Capernaum had a fishing industry. Peter and Andrew ran their fishing partnership there as well as did James and John.

Capernaum was also along a major international trade route. It was called, the *Via Maris*, the Way of the Sea. The trade route connected ethnic people from the East with others from the West. So merchants in caravans traveled though from far away places. They were places like present day Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt.

Rome recognized Capernaum's importance. It did because it had set up a garrison there. The garrison was to maintain order in that section of the empire. Rome also had a customs house in Capernaum. Matthew worked at that customs house as he collected revenue for the Roman Empire.

So Capernaum was a place where different ethnic peoples mixed. It was part of the "Galilee of the Gentiles." Literally, "Galilee of the ethnic peoples." There the ethnic peoples mixed; they traded; they passed through. And all of it was on Jewish land. It was land allotted to two of the Twelve Tribes; the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Part II

It is of this land that Matthew cites the prophet Isaiah, “the people who sat in darkness.” In the darkness you don’t know where you are going. Without light, you have to feel your way. You have to grope about until you find something to grab onto. What you grab onto might not be exactly good for you. To be sure, it might seem so at first, but then some venomous creature might come around to bite you. It’s no wonder that, then, over this darkness hangs an unsettling image; “the shadow of death.” It’s only a matter of time until its shadow envelops those sitting in darkness.

That’s how Capernaum and its surrounding community are pictured: Jew and Gentile sitting in darkness, in the shadow of death. It’s not that they were sunk in the grave. No they weren’t. Its people were busy, trading, fishing, soldiering, collecting taxes, making a life. Though they were alive, they were in the dark. They were groping after money, pleasure, self-righteous pride, pagan gods. None of it would give them what they were looking for. In the end it would all come around to bite them and leave them for dead.

It doesn’t sound a whole lot different than life in our community, does it? People are running here and there; groping after this and after that. They are chasing after a mirage, hoping to win the jackpot. They are feeding bad habits, trying to create a thrilling rush. They are running after success, believing that will satisfy them. They are running after the latest religious thought, thinking it will give them what they want. They are promoting no way is better than another, convinced that every way is the same way. They are seeking, but never finding; searching, but never striking the jackpot; groping, but never grasping the truth.

Someone expressed from personal experience what it is like groping about in this darkness. “The harder I worked, the emptier I felt...In time I saw that my personal definition of success was mistaken...I had manufactured artificial goals as a means of motivating my self, using my longing for money, cars, and other material possessions to create a false sense of purpose. They had worked on me like spoonfuls of sugar - a jolt of energy that soon faded, leaving behind the pangs of a deeper hunger. I had cut myself off from the transcendent hope of religion, and now a vast and frightening expanse of uncertainty lay before me.”^{iv}

That’s what happens when we grope about in the darkness. We reach for happiness, pleasure, acceptance in this life. While there is nothing wrong with them in and of themselves, they will come back and bite us if that is the substance of what we grasp. Bitten, we end up disillusioned. Disillusioned, we fall into despair and hopelessness. That’s what it is to be sitting in the darkness and to have death cast its shadow over us. It is to be without hope.

Part III

To be sure, it is a depressing scenario. Yet, on this depressing scene, a stroke of Light is brushed. That stroke of Light, changes the dynamics of the scenario before us.

It does, because the "Light has dawned." Jesus has come. "He came and dwelt in Capernaum." Jesus came to Jew and Gentile there. It's what today, Epiphany, is all about. Jesus came *not only* for the Jew *but also* for the Gentile. Jesus came for all the ethnic people of the world. He came to shed his Light on them.

The first Gentiles to whom Jesus came after his birth were the Wise Men. The Wise Men were from the East, present day Iraq. An earlier Wise Man, Daniel, had left a legacy for them, the Old Testament Scriptures. The Scriptures told them heaven's King would come. Then God sent a special star to announce his birth. It's what God foretold. "A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel."^v It all said the King had come. So, they packed their bags, loaded the caravan, and traveled the Via Maris in search of the new born King.

Now the King is grown up. He is just beginning his ministry. And where does he go? He goes to Capernaum; to the "Galilee of the Gentiles." There he establishes his mission headquarters. From there Jesus shed his light not only on many a Jew, but also many a Gentile. There was the Roman centurion torn up over his dying servant, a woman from nearby SyroPhonacia vexed by a demon possessing her daughter, a Samaritan woman broken by many failed relationships. They are a few of the many, of whom Jesus said, would "come from the East and the West and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."^{vi}

It all goes to say that the Light kept chasing away the shades of darkness as it dawned first on the Wise Men, then on many a Gentile since them. It did beginning in Capernaum and spread to far away places. The Light has dawned as far away as your and my hearts sitting here in Gresham. It has because Jesus came for you and me; he came for you and me because he came for all people no matter what ethnic background.

He did, and the sins of all were laid on him. It doesn't matter what ethnic heritage you have; what the pigment of your skin is; what ethnic foods you like to eat, Jesus died for you. He stretched his hands out in the dark as it were, on the cross. Your sins of groping about in the dark pierced the palms of his hands. The sins that should have bit you, bit him.

Since they did, God no longer holds your sins against you. Your sins of groping about in the dark have all been laid to rest in Jesus' grave. He rose to tell you so.

So, from the empty tomb, the Light had dawned for all the world to see. "You are forgiven! Forgiven you have life in the Light. It is Life that fills you when

everything else leaves you empty; that shines the Way when every other way leaves you in the dark; that gives you hope when you have no other hope; that invigorates you when death casts its long shadows.”

Part IV

The Light has dawned. To be sure, at times it seems like the Light will loose out. It may even have seemed like that in Capernaum. Jesus did much work there. He began to preach “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’ The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, because heaven’s King is here. I am Heaven’s King. Trust me!” Many did. Many didn’t.

That led Jesus to speak words of warning near the end of his ministry. “And you, Capernaum...if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you, it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.vii” The Light had dawned, but many stayed put the dark shadows of sin and death.

We live in a time when darkness is falling again. The mission activity of the church blazed bright for centuries in the West. The Western world was largely Christianized. But now culture is rejecting Christianity out of hand. It is reverting more and more to paganism, hedonism, and statism. More and more are touting atheism, materialism and other isms. The list can go on an on. People are walking in the dark; and the darkness is spreading.

The darkness is spreading, but the light will not be put out. It cannot be extinguished. God gives us his promise. “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”viii Satan can unleash all the fury of his dark hordes, but the Light will shine. No matter how dark the darkness around you is, the Light pierces it.

It does as God’s message of repentance is preached. It is the message that convicts sinners of sin and comforts sinners in Jesus; it preaches sin and grace; law and gospel. The church, in turn, is called to gather around the preaching of repentance. It is called to come out of the darkness and into the Light.

Here in the preaching of repentance is the Light; the Light has dawned. The Light is Jesus. He has come for all; that includes you. In him you have the Light of life. Amen!

ⁱ References to the text (NKJV) will not be cited in the sermon

ⁱⁱ rhinelander.com/timeline

ⁱⁱⁱ andinarestaurant.com/history

^{iv} *My Grandfather’s Son*, Clarence Thomas, Harper, New York, 2007, p. 116-117

^v Numbers 24.17

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- vi Matthew 8.11
 - vii Matthew 11.23,24 (ESV)
 - viii Matthew 16.18