

Isaiah 9:1-4
Matthew 4:12-23

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“Can you tell me how to get to Naphtali?”

I make several assumptions in coming to church on Sunday mornings. Among them is that you, like me, has come to hear what this book has to say to us for another week. I assume that we wouldn't open it every week if we didn't want to hear what it has to say.

This means I also assume that, despite all appearances, you have not come to hear what I have to say, but that you, like me, has come to hear what this book, this story, this living witness we call the word of God, has to say. I assume you understand that I, like you, am a listener.

I assume, therefore, that we have not come with our minds already made up about what we might hear, but have come with an openness to see and think differently.

I assume that we want to do more than just read the book, for we could have stayed home and done that. I assume we want to do more than just think about what the book's trying to say to us as individuals, for again, we could have stayed home in our beds and done that. No question, reading this book and listening for God on our own has its time and place. The world is too loud, and we could all benefit from more quiet time alone with God. But in being here, sitting side by side, I assume it's because we want to hear something that will be useful to us as a people, something that will shed some light on who we've become together, and show us how we can be better still.

I mention all this because this morning we are being confronted with two passages of scripture that I believe, in the hands of listeners such as us, have the potential to do this. And by “this,” I mean these have the potential to undo us.

No doubt you noticed that these two passages sound almost the same, being separated only by time and speaker. First, from Isaiah chapter nine, about 700 years before the time of Jesus—

“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.”

At first hearing, this sounds like a story in which nothing but good things are happening. The people who walked in darkness, who have had only to stumble about in darkness, have seen a great light. Someone has come to do for them what they could not figure out how to do for themselves; someone has fixed the breakers, bought and replaced the bulbs, flipped the switch, and restored the light. Change, good change, has come for the people.

The nation’s joy has been increased, Isaiah declares. Having joy does not mean there is necessarily political agreement on all sides. It does not mean there are no more debates, no more disagreements, no more differences between parties. It does mean, however, that the nation has decided to put aside everything that steals joy from the people and to choose instead that which gives joy back to them. And what is joy? Joy is when all seems done, and you realize all is just beginning. Joy is the discovery of more.

I think of the father who ran down the path from his front porch to greet his prodigal son. He called together the neighbors and said, “Look, what was lost has been found, what was gone has come again.” There is more, there is more!

I think of the women at the tomb on Easter morning who, upon discovering the stone had been rolled away and that the body of their friend Jesus was missing, ran from the scene in fear, and with great joy. In the face of death, there is more, there is more!

I think of Mary who ran to greet her cousin Elizabeth. Two women, one too young to have a baby, the other too old to have a baby, both said to be barren, but both now finding

themselves pregnant. They meet at the door to Elizabeth's house and the child inside of Elizabeth's worn-out body does what? Does what? He leaps for joy. There is more, there is more!

I think of what the poet Emily Dickinson once wrote,

"Life is but life, and death but death!
And if, indeed, I fail,
...At least to know
Defeat means nothing but defeat,
'T is so much joy! 'T is so much joy!"

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, the nation's joy has been increased. It all sounds so good it makes you want to get on a bus or a plane, or walk there if you have to, to go be a part of this nation of joy right now, doesn't it? The only problem is, there is no such place. Isaiah tells us in his opening verse that he's referring to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it's the people of Zebulun and Naphtali who, once walking in darkness, now walk in light. But look more closely and you'll see it's all just a vision.

"In the latter time," he says in verse 1. In other words, not now, but someday, someday we'll be able to say, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Someday we'll be able to say the nation's joy has been increased." It would be wonderful if Isaiah could say it was true now, but he can't say that. All he can say is, someday.

But if it isn't all happening now, why does Isaiah make it sound like it is? "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Sounds like the present tense to me.

What's helpful to understand is that much of the book of Isaiah was written as Hebrew poetry. As such, no English translation has ever quite been able to capture the essence of Isaiah's message. Take the 4 short verses Annie read for us. They come off sounding like they are written in the present tense, when in fact they are written in the future perfect

tense. The future perfect tense (stay with me, I promise this is about to get interesting), the future perfect tense is used to make something sound like it's already been done, when in actuality, it hasn't been done yet at all. In other words, when Isaiah says, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," he's really saying, "The people who walked in darkness have not yet but already seen a great light." And when he says, "The nation's joy has been increased," he means, "The nation's joy has not yet but already been increased."

You can see why English translators decided to go with their own version of things. And yet, when the residents of Zebulun and Naphtali first heard these words 2700 years ago, they knew Isaiah meant "not yet but already. So what is he trying to get across by putting it to us this way?

Well, Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the 12 sons born to Jacob; in the Old Testament, also called Israel. Jacob, we know, had two wives—Rachel and Leah. It was Rachel that Jacob really wanted, and Rachel whom Jacob loved the most. But when Rachel couldn't get pregnant, she told her slave-girl, Bilhah, to get the job done for her. The outcome was Naphtali. As for Zebulun, he was born to Leah, Jacob's "other, lesser" wife. Things might have gone better for both of the boys, except eventually Rachel does become pregnant, and when she does, Leah, Bilhah, and their sons get demoted to the bottom of the family tree, where they are treated as worse than family, they are treated as family who is not family. They become exiles and refugees within their own four walls. Lights out.

As fate or misfortune would have it though, in time all of Jacob's sons would become exiles under the Assyrians, who in a grand show of warfare defeat his ancestors and move in to occupy all the land ever belonging to Jacob, now called just Israel. It is into this land of darkness, this land of exploitation and greed, of bloodshed and sorrow, that God would call Isaiah to go and become a prophet of light and joy.

What is it, though, that makes Isaiah to stand up in a land of deep darkness, a land where there is no light, and no present hope of light, and say there is light? Is he a tease, a fool, a hopeless optimist? I don't know.

What is that makes a bride and groom to stand up on their wedding day and make promises about a future they know nothing about? What is that makes us to come here on Sunday mornings and offer prayers of healing on behalf of people we ourselves have no power to heal? What is that makes people show up at funerals and gravesides and to declare in the face of death, "There is more, there is more! There is joy!"

What is it that makes Jesus in our gospel passage today—a passage in which he has just received word that his dear friend John has been arrested—what is it that makes Jesus leave his home and set out for the land of Zebulun and Naphtali? We know that Jesus loved John and that John had been arrested only for speaking truth to power. To hear of John's arrest must have felt like a great darkness coming over Jesus. Why in his time of darkness would he go to the lands of more darkness? According to Matthew, it was to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
on those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned."

My read is that Jesus knew what Isaiah knew. He knew what Martin Luther King Jr. would come to know. He knew what I believe we have come to know. That darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. So if you want to see the light, you first have to go to where it is dark.

I started out this sermon by saying that I make several assumptions in coming here to church each week, and that among them is the assumption that we know this book and what it says has the potential to undo us. And this morning I feel a bit undone to think that, while I've come here to be with Jesus and his people, Jesus and his people may be somewhere else. While I have come here because this is a place of light, Jesus has meanwhile gone off to find a place of darkness where the light has yet to go. Jesus is headed for Zebulun and Naphtali.

At the start of every new year, we as a church take up a whole series of questions about how we plan to grow our children's programming and our youth programming for another year, and what improvements do we want to make to our facilities and grounds to make them more accessible and inviting to all, and which organizations and causes do we want to share our mission money with. But of all the questions we will have to answer this year, the most important one, I believe, is, where are we going? As the church of Jesus, are we going towards the darkness and the people who live there, or are we only ever going towards our own light? Are we trusting in what we cannot see, or depending only on what we can? Do we know how to get to Naphtali?

There is one last thing that must be said this morning, and with this I close. Some of you know exactly where Naphtali is. You know where Naphtali is because you just came from there. Naphtali is where you live there every day, all week long. In fact, the whole reason you come to church is to get away from Naphtali. Which means the last thing you want to hear is, go to Naphtali. For you, I have this vision from God, that in your land of deep darkness, light has come. Amen.