

A Light Has Dawned

Matthew 4:12-23

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January 26, 2020

When Matthew tells us that the people walking in darkness have seen a great light, he is quoting from the Old Testament passage we read earlier this morning from Isaiah 9:1-4. In reading about Isaiah 9 an author made a statement that immediately caught my attention. “In spite of the sufferings and apparent abandonment by God, divine mercy has triumphed and will continue to triumph over earthly misery.”¹ The author sees in this passage a struggle between misery and mercy. Since the central theme of the passage is that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, we can set darkness and light against each other, and again claim the good news that light will triumph over darkness. I want to be sure you hear the good news that light and mercy will triumph over darkness and misery, because we begin today considering misery. We are going to examine misery as we find it in the pages of the bible, and true to the old saying, we will discover that misery loves company.

Have you ever thought of the bible in terms of misery? Misery is there, believe me. Adam and Eve are evicted from the Garden of Eden, cast out to live East of Eden. Abel’s sacrifice might have been favorable to the Lord, but it stirred up a hornet’s nest of anger in his brother Cain. The misery Abel experienced was fatal. The deluge that covered the earth in the time of Noah brought widespread misery for everyone except the passengers on the ark. For some twenty-five years Abraham and Sarah endured the misery of not being successful in conceiving a child. The knee-jerk solutions they sought only served to compound their misery. Jacob’s deception brought him into such a miserable conflict with his brother Esau that he had to run for his life, seeking the safety of his uncle Laban’s house only to spend 20 miserable years having the tables turned on him by his deceptive uncle. Joseph knew the misery of being betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, and getting the short end of the stick in Egypt. And the whole nation of Israel knew the misery of slavery, four hundred years-worth, a misery so bad they cried out under their oppressive load.

¹ James H. Evans, Jr., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1*, p. 193.

Boy, if you only heard about the misery of the bible, you would be tempted to say it must be a miserable book. But if you said the bible was a miserable book you would be mistaken. The reason the bible is not a miserable book is because mercy triumphs over misery. Before Adam and Eve leave the garden, the Lord covers them with animal skins. The Lord places a mark on Cain to protect him. A rainbow fills the sky as God promises that such whole-sale destruction as found in the flood will not happen again. Abraham and Sarah's mourning turns to laughter when their boy Isaac is born. Jacob and Esau share a tender reunion. Joseph rises to prominence in Egypt and one day has a tearful reconciliation with his brothers. And after the long years of slavery, the people of Israel march to freedom right through the Red Sea, on dry land, singing songs about their awesome God.

I wonder if part of the enduring value of the bible is that it is a story of misery. My guess is all of us have experienced misery in one form or another. If we whose lives are marked by misery, and if we who live in a world filled with misery, if we opened a book about God and found there was no misery, how could we enter into a story a like that? If Adam and Eve were still dancing naked in the garden gathering apples...if Cain and Abel were working side by side in the field, one hunting, one planting...if Noah was walking through town slapping everyone on the back and saying, "Another day with nothing but blue skies...", if Abraham and Sarah never experienced infertility...if Jacob was cooking up a pot of stew as Esau walked through the door and said, "Honey, I'm home...", if Joseph was strutting around in his coat of many colors and his older brothers let him ride shotgun in Jacob's old twelve passenger van...and if Israel only ever tasted of the milk and honey of the Promised Land, would that be a story we could call home? We fit better in a miserable story, because the reality is, we know misery...we know heartache, we know infertility, we know conflict and broken relationships and sibling rivalry, we know oppression and humiliation. We know suffering. We know sorrow. We know sadness. We know sickness. And we know death. To a people who know misery, and who know misery intimately, the bible is opened for us and God says, "Come on in. There's a story here for you."

This morning I want to tell you a miserable story. It is a story of misery. Surprisingly, it is a story of misery that makes me laugh every time I tell it. Maybe today you will laugh with me. But along with whatever laughter might be present, I am telling a story about misery as a means of letting you know it is okay for your misery to be with us this morning. And my hope is that before we leave this time of worship, we will have heard the good news in no uncertain terms that mercy triumphs over misery. I invite you to listen to this miserable story. The story is in the form of an accident that has been reported and a request has been made for more information regarding the accident.

Dear Sir: I am writing in response to your request for additional information in Block #3 of the accident reporting form. I put "Poor Planning" as the cause of my accident. You asked for a fuller explanation and I trust the following details will be sufficient.

I am a bricklayer by trade. On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a new six-story building. When I completed my work, I found I had some bricks left over which when weighed later were found to weigh 240 lbs. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel by using a pulley which was attached to the side of the building at the sixth floor.

Securing the rope at ground level, I went up to the roof, swung the barrel out and loaded the bricks into it. Then I went down and untied the rope, holding it tightly to insure a slow descent of the 240 lbs of bricks. You will note on the accident reporting form that my weight is 135 lbs.

Due to my surprise at being jerked off the ground so suddenly, I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rapid rate up the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel which was now proceeding downward at an equally impressive speed. This explains the fractured skull, minor abrasions and the broken collarbone, as listed in Section 3, accident reporting form.

Slowed only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley which I mentioned in Paragraph 2 of this correspondence. Fortunately, by this time I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold tightly to the rope, in spite of the excruciating pain I was now beginning to experience.

At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground-and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Now devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel weighed approximately 50 lbs.

I refer you again to my weight. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent down the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles, broken tooth and severe lacerations of my legs and lower body.

Here my luck began to change slightly. The encounter with the barrel seemed to slow me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell into the pile of bricks and fortunately only three vertebrae were cracked.

I am sorry to report, however, as I lay there on the pile of bricks, in pain, unable to move and watching the empty barrel six stories above me, I again lost my composure and presence of mind and let go of the rope.

I guess I could conclude the telling of this story with some brazen comment like, "I laugh in the face of misery." That story does make me laugh. Nevertheless, I don't laugh in the face of misery. In fact, my heart aches and my heart breaks knowing the misery some of you have had to endure. I know that misery is literally miserable, and the fact that you would come here, to the house of God, and open a book that in all honesty is filled with misery, and that you would hold on to the belief that this book, and the God who is at the center of this book, has the ability to take the misery found in these pages, and the misery found in the pages of our lives, and bring hope, well, that says a lot about the faith you have, and it says a lot about the God in whom you put your faith. So, to all of us who know misery, and who know misery intimately, I want to say yet again, "Mercy triumphs over misery."

The words, “Mercy triumphs misery” were written in response to the passage from Isaiah 9 about ones who walked in the darkness and have now seen a great light. What misery was being experienced in Isaiah 9? The passage begins by referring to ones who have been in distress. According to the passage, the ones who have been in distress were the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. Jacob had twelve sons, each one of the sons became a tribe when the people settled in the Promised Land. All the twelve tribes were assigned land. In the context of the Book of Isaiah, the Assyrians had conquered the tribes known as the Northern Kingdom, the tribes of Samaria. Zebulun and Naphtali belonged to the Northern tribes. When the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom, “Zebulun and Naphtali were among the first tribes...carried away into captivity by the Assyrians.”²

What misery did Zebulun and Naphtali experience? They were conquered by their enemies, and then they were carried away into captivity. They went into exile. Being reminded that Zebulun and Naphtali went into exile hit me very hard. I talk about the exile often. The exile was a watershed event for Israel. But when I talk about the exile, I am almost always talking about the exile into Babylon, the exile that followed the conquest of the Babylonians when the walls of Jerusalem fell, and the temple was destroyed. That happened in 587/86 BCE. That exile, which I talk about often, is not the exile Zebulun and Naphtali experienced. Their exile was in 721 BCE. In many ways, the exile Zebulun and Naphtali experienced was one from which they never recovered. And their exile doesn't get near the attention of the Babylonian exile, if it gets any attention at all. The incredibly profound misery experienced by Zebulun and Naphtali is captured in this comment about the times when Jesus lived, some 750 years after the exile of Zebulun and Naphtali. “Their exile was so traumatic that Zebulun and Naphtali as names for these tribes and territories receded from the conscious memory of the people.”³ When Jesus lived no one called the area Zebulun and Naphtali. It had been forgotten. Even their misery had been forgotten. Talk about miserable. Hardly anyone even remembered the misery they had endured.

² Evans, op. cit., p. 194.

³ Ibid.

When we moved to Houston, one of the first family's we met was expecting a baby. We were excited and so we made plans to get together with them and hear all about their good news. What we found out was that along with their good news of expecting a baby, they had endured a very sad experience, a heartbreaking experience. They had experienced the misery of giving birth to twins, who unfortunately were very premature. Within a short time, the twins had both died. Well, when their new baby was born, we rejoiced with them and baptized him and have loved watching him grow into a fine young man. But their story of loss touched us so much we tried really hard to remember during that time of year when the twins had been born, and the twins had died, to make some effort to let these dear friends know we remembered the sadness they had been through. Without fail, every effort of remembrance was met with deep gratitude. Being forgotten is its own form of misery, and it was a form of misery experienced by Zebulun and Naphtali. Maybe one of the ways mercy triumphs over misery is through remembering. Instead of forgetting, we remember.

Remember is a very interesting word. Remember stands in marked contrast to the word forget. But there is another word that stands in contrast to remember, and that word seems to me to be very important for us today. The word I am thinking of that stands in contrast to remember is the word dismember. To find a connection between remember and dismember, you really have to think literally. Dismember is to pull apart the members, like the members of a body. Think arms and legs ripped away from the body. It is a gruesome image, that image of dismember. In contrast, re-member is to put the pieces of the body back together.

The word dismember serves as a poignant depiction of what Zebulun and Naphtali had experienced. First there were twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve sons of Jacob. After King Solomon there was a split. The twelve tribes were dismembered. The two tribes of Judah and Benjamin became the Southern Kingdom, the kingdom of Judah, with the capitol in Jerusalem. The ten other tribes formed the Northern Kingdom with the capitol in Samaria. During the conquest by the Assyrians the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali were further dismembered, they were the first ones ripped away and carried into captivity. It was these two tribes, these two

who were dismembered, torn apart, torn away, who were in many ways forgotten. That was their misery. And it was dark. They were indeed a people who walked in darkness.

When Matthew writes about Jesus in chapter 4 and verse twelve, he places Jesus in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. That is where Galilee is. That is where Nazareth is. A people who had been dismembered were about to be remembered, brought back into the Body. A people who had been forgotten were about to be remembered. Their names would matter again. And a people who walked in darkness would see a great light. On those living in the shadow of death (misery) a light had dawned.

Think about what happens in this one little passage that introduces the ministry of Jesus Christ. Light shines in the darkness. We need that. In this little passage, names play a prominent role. You see, we not only learn the names of Zebulun and Naphtali, when Jesus goes out to the Sea of Galilee, he calls fisherman to follow him. The fishermen have names, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. We don't know it yet, as it is so early in the Gospel of Matthew, but soon we realize Jesus is re-membering the twelve tribes of Israel, for he will choose twelve disciples to be his own. He knows each of the disciples by name.

How does he know them by name? What I am going to tell you next probably is not literally true, at least not literally as we think of the word. What I am going to tell you is that Jesus knew their names because their names were written on the palms of his hands. Isaiah told us a servant would come. That servant had heard a complaint. The complaint was that God had forgotten the people, forgotten people like Zebulun and Naphtali, forgotten tribes of people like Zebulun and Naphtali. When the complaint was raised that God had forgotten his people, the servant assured the people that God had not forgotten, because their names were written on the palms of his hands. Jesus came as the Servant of the Lord. How does Jesus know Peter and Andrew and James and John by name? Their names were written on the palms of his hands. Maybe not literally. And then again, maybe it was literally.

One day Jesus would hold out those hands where everyone's name was inscribed. One day Jesus would hold out those hands of a servant, the servant who suffered and endured shame and rejection, who was wounded and offered up like a lamb that was sacrificed, one day Jesus would hold out his hands and his hands would bear the marks of the nails that pierced his hands. I can't explain how it happens, but ever since Jesus held out his nail-pierced hands for us to see, countless people have looked at those hands and they have seen their own name written on the palms of his hands. Countless people have looked at those hands, those nail-pierced hands, and their lives, once dismembered, have been re-membered, made whole again. Countless people have looked at those hands, at the nail-pierced hands of Jesus, and in those hands, they have recognized the God whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. Countless people have reached out to those hands for forgiveness, for cleansing, for healing, and for wholeness. Countless people have reached out for the nail-pierced hands of Jesus, and time and time and time and time and time again...when they hold the hands of Jesus, the darkness turns to light.

I know there is misery in this world. I know it is a misery that has hit many of you here in deep and personal ways. Today I want to make sure we all hear the good news. Mercy triumphs over misery. Mercy triumphs over misery. Jesus has the hands to prove it. I wonder if today might be the day you reach out for his hands. When you take his hands, you will see that your name is written on his hands. He remembers you. And he will re-member you. He will make you whole. He will make you right. He will make you his. Won't you reach out and take his hands today. When you do, you will find that his mercy truly does triumph over misery.