A Light Has Dawned

Grace and peace are yours from Jesus your Lord and Savior! Amen.

Just think how much we take "Light" for granted. You walk into a room, and without thinking, you flip on the switch, or you ask Alexa to do it for you. Instantly there's light and you go on with your day. Lights are everywhere… windows allow light to pour in, fixtures hang from the ceilings, lamps sit on tables… We have portable flashlights, lights on our phone, even little pen-lights. There are lights to illuminate our streets and cities; our cars have high beams, low beams and fog lights below that. There are soft night-lights to guide us through the room without stubbing our toe. There's incandescent, and halogen, and LED lights… If the power's out, we light a few candles and enjoy their glow. Shall I continue?

Light is so easily accessible, so prevalent, that it can be very hard imagine and grasp to what it must be like to live in utter pitch-black darkness; darkness so thick dark you can't see your own hand in front of your face darkness. Perhaps you've toured an underground cave, and they shut the lights off for 30 seconds… just 30 seconds… but it felt like forever. Unless you've lost your eyesight, it's very hard for us to image living in that kind of darkness, day in and day out – and yet that's the darkness we find in Matthew chapter 4:

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."

At the time of John being put in prison, Jesus is about 1 year into his public ministry, most of which has happened in the Jerusalem area. Jesus heads north now into the region of Galilee – for many reasons, not the least of which is to fulfill prophecy spoken by Isaiah. The geographic clues of Zebulun and Naphtali – two tribes that settled near the Sea of Galilee when Joshua led the Children of Israel into the Promised Land – help us understand "darkness."

It's not that these people lived in caves their whole lives, and yes, this was before electricity. The darkness that is spoken of is equated with "those who are living in the shadow of death." In other words, these are people living in the dark - spiritually. How? Aren't they the Children of Israel? Well… sort of…

Remember that the Northern 10 Tribes of Israel were annihilated in the early 700's by the Assyrians; but even before they, when they separated themselves from Jerusalem, they separated themselves from worshiping at the Temple in Jerusalem; and other places of worship were set up. On top of that, they openly practiced worshiping the idols of other nations which was a main reason God allowed Assyria to invade and capture and destroy. Additionally, the Assyrians, in their military conquests, brought in other peoples to live in these lands… so this area was a mixed bag of peoples, cultures, languages and false religions.

Spiritually, the people were living in pitch-black, thick, darkness. They didn't know the truth about their own sin… about who the true God is… about the words and promises of the One true God. And because of this, the shadow of eternal death and separation from God eternally in hell was creeping closer and closer – and they couldn't see the danger – anymore than one can see their hand in front of their face in a cave.

This is a reality that exists still today because of what the Scriptures tell us about mankind's spiritual condition from birth. We are conceived in sin, born of sinful parents; we come into this world spiritual dead, blind, deaf – unable to know, or see, or grasp the truth of our sin or of the grace of God. The only answer mankind comes up with is some version of works, deeds, foolish attempts to appease the higher powers in the hopes that they might grant us some kind of favor, or at least won't pay us back for all the things our guilty conscience bothers us with. "Maybe if I turn my life around… maybe if I start giving to charities… maybe if I help out my neighbors a bit more… maybe if I???" You know what God calls these "maybe's"? – Darkness, unbelief, wickedness and sin that deserves eternal darkness. And we'd be lying to ourselves if we think we've been immune to this.

For many of us here, God be praised that we were brought up in the light; we had parents who pointed us to Jesus, who shared God's Word with us, who taught us the Scriptural truths about our Original Sin and the working of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. But to think that we are immune to the darkness… that we can take light for granted…??? we'd be fooling ourselves!!

Putting it more concretely… to think we're impervious to the darkness of sin, that we can dabble and play with the sins and temptations of the devil – because "I know where the light switch is…" this is the shadow of death creeping closer and closer. To think, "It's okay to engage in sin, because I can check in at church and that will fix it," is not only taking the "light" for granted, but treating God's grace and patience as if it were, "Hey Alexa… give me some forgiveness." *On those living in the shadow of death* – because of our sinful nature, our sinful heart, our own self-centeredness – such is the daily struggle with the darkness of sin.

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."*** Thanks be to God! Into our world, into our lives, into our hearts, God has had mercy upon us and has sent his Son. What a miracle, what grace – that the Light of Jesus Christ has not only dawned upon us, but that the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to see the true light that gives life – our Savior Jesus. In the same way God has opened our ears to hear, *17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*

Did you notice how Jesus' message was the same and imprisoned John the Baptist? And that's not surprising that it's the same message our ears hear today. The call to "Repent!" is universal, it applies to all because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So too is the call to believe – Repent and believe the Good News – the Kingdom of Heaven – God's ruling power, God's grace, God's love and compassion is here, now, today! And once again, the Holy Spirit does what he does best – gives us the very faith to repent of our sin, to turn from its darkness, and to believe the forgiveness and Jesus that has won for us on the cross.

Upon you, dear friends, this light has dawned. And it is rightly called "a Great Light." It not only drives away the darkness of sin, it lights out path. When the Psalmist proclaims, that your Word is a Lamp to my feet – that means the very words of Jesus apply here and now, to every moment of our lives. Helping us see the dangers of sin and turn from them, guiding our steps in paths of righteousness, not sin; teaching us everyday what it means to live for him who has brought us into this wonderful light.

And the Psalmist says that his word is a light for my path. God's Word alone shows us the path that leads to eternal life! Go back to that pitch black dark cave for a moment… those 30 seconds of darkness… and then the guide clicks on a little flashlight and shines it on the path… the path that leads out of the darkness. How your heart is overjoyed!

Perhaps that's what it was like for those living in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. A light dawned – and we know they were filled with joy. Nowhere else in Jesus' ministry did crowds flock to him as they did in Galilee. Thousands sat listening all day long, refusing to go home to eat – so Jesus, multiple times, fed them. Crowds gathered on the shores of Galilee – so much so that Jesus had to go out into a boat so that he could preach to all of them. And when he sailed across the sea, they ran around the shores of the lake to met him on the other side… they just wanted to be in the Light – the light that had dawned upon them.

Lord, fill us with that zeal, that joy, that peace as we bask in the Light, eagerly gathering for worship, excitedly opening Scriptures, running after every opportunity to be in your light – and in turn, Lord, cause us to shine with your wonderful light, so that others who are still sitting in darkness, may see the light of Christ that has dawned. Amen.