

## The Light of the Word Continues

### Matthew 4:12-23 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup> Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—<sup>14</sup> to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: <sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— <sup>16</sup> 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.” <sup>17</sup> From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” <sup>20</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> 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, <sup>22</sup> and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. <sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

In following the narrative of Jesus’ life through our Bible readings on Sunday, a lot of time has passed since he was born in Bethlehem. For us, about two weeks after celebrating Christmas, we heard the wise men came to visit when Jesus was maybe about two years old. The Sunday after that, we celebrated Jesus’ baptism by John, which happened about 28 years after the Magi’s visit. Days after that, John the Baptist was pointing Jesus out as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, as we heard last Sunday. Then we hear this transition today: “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.” (verse 12)

You might think, “Wow. John’s ministry was really short,” but that one verse encapsulates about another year in Jesus’ life after his baptism by John. It’s not as if John pointed out that Jesus was the Lamb of God and was arrested the next day. No, John continued to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 3:1) He did not preach repentance only to those who joined him on the banks of the Jordan River; he also preached repentance about his ruler, Herod Antipas, and about Herod’s stealing of his brother’s wife. Just because he was their ruler, he was not above God’s law. Herod Antipas, though, thought he was and imprisoned John for calling him out on his actions with his brother’s wife.

Before John’s arrest, though, a lot happened with Jesus over that one year. He went through the 40 day and 40 night challenge of being tempted by the devil. He met many of the people who would eventually become his full time disciples, even changed Simon’s name to Peter. Some of these men accompanied Jesus to a wedding in Cana where Jesus did his first miracle by changing water into wine. But Jesus did not just operate in secret; he also went down to Jerusalem and preached. In fact, he created quite a bit of a stir by driving out the money changers and all their sheep and cattle from the temple courts. During this time Jesus taught a Pharisee named Nicodemus that unless he was born again by water and the Spirit (baptism) that he would not see the kingdom of God. This is where Jesus says those famous words that, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) After all this, Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth, but his people rejected him. After all these events, Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested. That’s when Jesus withdrew to Galilee.

Can you imagine being one of John’s disciples at that time. You had been baptized by him, you were preparing for the imminent coming of the Messiah, you were even there when he pointed to Jesus and he said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”, you came and listened to him as often as you could. Then it happens. Soldiers come, and take him away. Maybe you were there when it happened, maybe you weren’t. Maybe you heard about it the next time you came to hear John preach and couldn’t find him. Your fellow believers had to inform you that your preacher was arrested and put in a dungeon for proclaiming God’s Word. Is this over? Do we have no one else to preach? Will there be no more baptisms? To whom do we go now? Who will bring us God’s Word? Will we ever hear the Word of God again? Will we be plunged back into the darkness of our sins without the Word of God?

Would it be any different if that happened today? What if, God forbid, I was arrested for what I was preaching to you, preaching just the Word of God – not some inflammatory, hate-ridden, antigovernment garbage, but the only charge was proclaiming what God’s Word said about what God expects of us, what God demands of us, and the consequences of not meeting those demands and expectations? What if when you came to church next Sunday, you found out that your pastor had been arrested for being a pastor. What would happen to your church? Who would lead services? Who would bring you the Word of God? Would anyone want to take up these tasks knowing that you can be arrested for doing such things? Would this church disband and scatter? Would Light of the

Valley stop shining, become dark, die out? Would you and your life be plunged back into the spiritual darkness of sin with the light now gone away?

Even with John arrested and stuck in some dark, dank dungeon, the light was not extinguished. The light was not extinguished because it had already come. Remember that it's just a few verses after what's quoted from our First Lesson in Isaiah 9:2 that a light had dawned, and that light was a child who was born, one called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. We heard those words on Christmas Eve. We saw that the Light of the world had come, the Light no darkness can overcome.

The Light was not extinguished with John's arrest. In fact, it began to shine brighter. "Leaving Nazareth, [Jesus] went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: 'Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond 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.' From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" (verses 13-17) Sound familiar? That's because this is what John had been preaching to prepare people for the Light of the world.

John may be in prison, but the Light of God's Word continued to shine, spread, and reach more people. In this case, it was being spread by the very Light of the world, the one who had come to bring all people out of the darkness of sin. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." (verse 23) God's Word continued to be preached. It did not stop; it didn't even slow down. Repentance, a complete life change, a turning away from sin and a turning to God for forgiveness, was still being preached, still being believed, especially because the Messiah had come. The Light had dawned on the people. The kingdom of heaven had come near to them. Jesus was the Light who would bring them into God's kingdom.

The light of the Word of God was not extinguished; instead, it was being preached with even more fervor. Jesus knew the time appointed for him was coming when he would sacrifice himself as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. Yes, he would be brought back to life, but then he would return to heaven. He would not always be on earth in the way he was when John was arrested. So, he now recruited his disciples to full-time status. He called Peter, Andrew, James, and John from their vocation of fishermen and offered them the position of fishers of men, to cast out a net of the Word of God to bring people into the kingdom of heaven, to preach repentance, to save people out of a land of darkness and instead haul them into the light of life. They would follow Jesus now full time for two more years, watching him, learning from him, preaching that same message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (verse 17) The Light of God's Word shone brighter. The Light of God's Word continued.

The Light of God's Word is not dependent on the physical presence of the preacher. The preacher is not the Light. John was not the Light. The Light is the message of who God is and what he does for us. The Light is Jesus, true God and true Man, who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That Light has dawned, and it cannot be taken away and it cannot be extinguished no matter how many preachers this world puts in jail.

If something were ever to happen to your preacher, (not that I am planning on doing something to get arrested, but if it did...) you can be assured that the Light of the world will continue to shine. It will just shine through someone new, someone different. For those of you who have been at Light of the Valley since the 90s, you have seen that reality. No pastor was arrested, but they did move on to serve other congregations. Yet, God raised up for you more fishers of men. After their training was complete, they came to you. God's Word continued even when there wasn't a pastor here. Other men not called into this position full time proclaimed God's message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (verse 17) The Light of God's Word has continued to shine here for 25 years! It doesn't matter which person this message comes through. What matters is the God who continues gives the message generation after generation, the God who is the message, who is the Light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome.

The message those people heard on the banks of the Jordan, that they heard from Jesus' own lips, that they heard from Peter, Andrew, James, and John, is the same good news message we hear today. Jesus is the Light of the world, the Light that scatters the darkness of our sin. That message will endure forever. There will always be another person to proclaim it because God will not let the Light of his Word be extinguished. The Light of God's Word will always shine on. Amen.