

“HOPE IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS”

Luke 4:16-30

Imagine a place where coldness and silence reign supreme, where human suffering is met with indifference. Envision a world driven by self-indulgence, where financial profit, business deals, and the bottom line dictate every action. Individuals are dehumanized in this pursuit. In this place, mercy is a precious and rare commodity.

Where is this God-forsaken place?

Its 8th century BC Jerusalem, the world he depicts in the final eleven chapters of his book.

Isaiah, chapter 59 is one of the darkest in all of Scripture, filled with words that paint a grim picture: iniquity, sin, defilement, deceit, wickedness, disorder, vanity, turmoil, violence, evil, destruction, devastation, and crookedness.

Where are justice, salvation, and righteousness? Far, far away, Isaiah proclaims. God is appalled. No one intervenes. No one steps up to stop this descent into darkness. It's typical of life in Israel at this time.

But then, a shift occurs in chapter 60. **“Arise, shine, for your light has come!”** Isaiah proclaims (60:1). Epiphany Light is breaking through the encroaching darkness.

And today, in the Gospel we see this light arrives in the most unexpected way, in the most unexpected place – in the humble town of Nazareth. On a simple Sabbath, in His hometown synagogue, a young man is called upon to read the sacred Scriptures. He unrolls the scroll of Isaiah, and reads aloud:

***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.***

And then, an amazing declaration: Joseph's son, Jesus, proclaims, **“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”** Into a world steeped in darkness and evil, He's the one who intervenes. He is the one who's come to break the chains of darkness... and not just for Israel, but for the entire world.

The people of Nazareth were at first quite impressed. They'd always believed God would come through for them, and to hear it from one of their own was truly something.

But, their enthusiasm began to wane. Jesus started to redefine who the “poor,” the “captive,” and the “oppressed” truly were, and began to list Gentiles among those in need of freedom—the widow at Zarahath... Naaman, the Syrian... and things started to get a little uncomfortable.

Jesus had a much broader vision of God's kingdom than many in Nazareth were prepared for.

Instead of embracing the message of freedom, the people of Nazareth, fueled by anger and resentment, turn on Jesus. Their initial pride in having a prophet among them quickly gives way to a dangerous, self-serving anger.

Oh, how fragile our human faith and the ever-present danger of allowing prejudice and fear to blind us to the truth. It's a stark reminder that even in the face of divine revelation; human hearts can remain stubbornly closed.

Jesus, escapes this immediate threat. "His hour has not yet come." His death will come about in a different and ultimately more redemptive way.

But this incident in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth serves as a foreshadowing of the broader rejection He will face throughout his ministry, ending in his crucifixion.

Amazing, is it not? Their rage escalated to the point where they would have hurled Him over the cliff, ending His life. He would indeed face death, and at the hands of those He came to save. But not here. Not now.

That's the remarkable thing about light. It exposes what was hidden. You're unaware of the cockroaches lurking in your kitchen until you switch on the light. Likewise, we remain oblivious to the true extent of our sin and the depth of darkness within our hearts until the light of truth shines upon them. And sadly, this description of 8th-century BC Israel could mirror the darkness that pervades our world today, and the sin that continues to obscure our own hearts.

We have a choice. We can react with anger, deny our shortcomings, and justify ourselves by comparing ourselves to others, much like the people in the synagogue at Nazareth that day. We can choose to reject Jesus and His message. Or, we can choose repentance.

If you choose this first path, you can continue living life on your own terms. You might even find yourself more accepted by the world, perhaps even praised for your perceived "goodness" upon your death, despite any underlying flaws. But, this path ultimately leads to an eternity of separation from God and true fulfillment.

But, if you choose repentance, you become one of those whom Jesus came to save. You become part of the spiritually impoverished whom He seeks to enrich. You become one of the blind to whom He grants true sight, revealing the world as God sees it. You become one of the captives of sin whom He frees, setting you free from its grip. You become one of the oppressed for whom He champions. When you repent, Jesus declares: ***"I forgive you for all your sins, all your darkness, all your failures to love God and to love your neighbor. I forgive you! You are free."***

This is the true freedom and life Jesus came to offer, with which the people of Nazareth in Jesus' time were unfamiliar. For them, religion had become a rigid system of rules and regulations, focusing on minute details like Sabbath observance rather than on mercy and love. People were treated as mere possessions – bought, sold, exploited, and ultimately discarded. This is what they sought to do to Jesus when He didn't conform to their expectations.

But He was truly the Savior they, and we, desperately need. A Savior not for a select few, but for all humanity. A Savior, who didn't condone sin, but bore the weight of our sins, died for our transgressions, and calls all to repentance, offering forgiveness to everyone. A Savior who brings a profound freedom, not a fleeting one, but an eternal freedom. This freedom transcends all boundaries, embracing every individual regardless of their background or circumstances.

The line from our gospel, **“But passing through their midst, He went away”** highlights the tragic missed opportunity for the people of Nazareth.

And Jesus has gifts for you, right here, right now. He’s spoken to you through today’s Scriptures, offering not just words, but the radiant light of His love. This love washes away your burdens, forgives your transgressions, nourishes your spirit, and grants you new life.

Are you feeling spiritually impoverished, having chased after fleeting things? Are you struggling with temptations and desires that hold you captive? Perhaps the world’s allure has blinded you to true meaning, or its noise deafened you to God’s voice. Maybe you feel weighed down by the darkness of this world.

If any of this resonates with you, then know this: Jesus is here with His gifts for you. He offers to illuminate your path, to usher in a season of favor, not just for a year, but for a lifetime, and even for eternity.

Remember, this Jesus, is not just “Joseph’s son”, but also the Son of God, the anointed one, the light of the world. He is the Lamb of God, offered as the ultimate sacrifice for your sins. He is the healer of the afflicted, the source of all blessings. He comes to bless you, to shine His light on you.

Having received these incredible blessings and been anointed by His Spirit through baptism, you’re now called to live out these gifts and share them with others. Extend a helping hand to the poor, offer comfort to the oppressed, stand with the captive, and show mercy to all who need it. Embrace this new life as God’s creation, reflecting His love for others, just as He first loved us.

It won’t always be easy. You may not face the immediate threat of physical danger, but the light of forgiveness can expose the shadows of sin. A life of mercy can illuminate the injustices around us. Speaking truth can challenge deeply held falsehoods. Just as no one enjoys discovering a cockroach infestation in their kitchen, we may resist the truth revealed by the light. But when the light shines, the truth becomes undeniable.

Understand this truth, but don’t let it discourage you. God has created you, redeemed you, sanctified you, and placed you here for a purpose: to live this new life. The love of God, poured into your heart, has brought you to life and set you free.

The journey may be challenging. You may face discouragement, encountering overwhelming needs with limited resources, or feeling overwhelmed by the darkness that surrounds us. You may even face the specter of death, the finality of the grave.

Yet, even in the face of these daunting realities, don’t lose heart. Just as Jesus conquered death and emerged triumphant from the darkness, so will you. Your Lord, who descended into death and ascended into eternal life, will raise you to new life and light. The darkness of sin, death, and evil will be forever vanquished, replaced by eternal light and life.

The message of Epiphany is a clarion call: **“Arise, shine, for your light has come!”** This message, proclaimed by Jesus in Nazareth, echoes here today. Embrace the light! Rejoice in it and allow it to grow within you. In the name of Jesus, Amen.