

From Isaiah: 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.

Matthew and Isaiah share an overlap today about people walking in darkness, and on them light shining. This is not accidental. In his gospel, Matthew looks at the beginnings of Jesus' ministry, and he remembers how those places where Jesus began were the very places Isaiah had mentioned years ago. Like a particular fork in the road from childhood, where you had to remember to turn to get where you are going. So he copies those words and he tucks them into his gospel like you or I might include an old bible verse or prayer into a card for someone we love. Those who walked in darkness—right there, by the old farm house with pond in front where people are always fishing, there light has shined.

And it is a wonderful metaphor to hear from them, about light shining on people in darkness. We know a lot about darkness, don't we? This past week we had a very dark day. It was Monday, the third Monday in January. It is called Blue Monday because it is supposed to be the saddest day of

the year. The combination of winter weather, short days, the holidays in the rearview mirrors, and their spending now coming due, conspire to give us this dark day.

Isaiah and Matthew knew nothing about Blue Monday, yet the scriptures they wrote speak so well to it. Both admit that we are too often a people who walk in darkness. I find their common metaphor to be compelling, not just during winter when the days are shorter, but for any of us brave enough to admit that some days it is just a little too dark, if by darkness we mean those things that frustrate our plans of faith and hope and love. We hide our faces from each other and of course from that Holy Other whose light we so desperately need. Whether darkness is to mean being afraid of what we do not understand, or just the conflict with people we love, or just places in life that need so desperately a little light, we know a lot about darkness.

Presbyterian Frederick Buechner says, "If we're people who pray, darkness is to be a lot of what our prayers are about. If we are people who do not pray, it is bound to be darkness in one form or another that has stopped our mouths."

We know a lot about darkness. But into that darkness, Isaiah says, light will shine.

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, James and John, to follow him. He sees all of them fishing, and he says to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Or literally, you will “catch people.”

Because of this story, fishermen have become a metaphor for discipleship, for all of us called by the gospel to share the hope that it brings. Sunday school children today will color pictures of Peter and Andrew coming out of their boats.

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people,” they will write on the bottom of their sheets. Preachers across America will climb into pulpits and tell fishing stories and fish jokes. Because Jesus said we are to catch people.

But that isn't all that there is to Matthew's fish story, is it? It is a story about discipleship and following Jesus, but it is also a moment when worlds collide. That was the day, he says, that Isaiah's prophecy came true, that in places of deep

darkness, on them light shone. So because of this, I have come to think the two are linked. Catching people is a lot like bringing light to dark places.

Matthew's gospel begins with a moment of darkness for Jesus. John the Baptist had been put in jail. They were cousins; they were friends. I imagine them like blood brothers, having carved the word repent into their arms and pressing it against each other. And perhaps out of that simple fidelity, or perhaps out of conviction of the larger work of God that lived in JTB, it shook Jesus to his core when John was arrested.

Matthew tells us Jesus pulled back and withdrew to Galilee, to an area where he would blend in and seem less conspicuous. It seems almost anemic, as if Jesus was afraid, or if not afraid, keenly aware of what happens to prophets who go around calling for repentance, asking and expecting people to change their minds and to change their ways.

Yet in that darkness Jesus must have dealt with the ramifications of what it would all mean for him, that he

would be killed on a lonely Friday afternoon, but that death would not be the final word. He would have a life and ministry that would bring light into those dark places. And he seems to have made peace with all of that. He even borrows a phrase from John the Baptist: Repent. Repent, he announces. No longer the words of a man afraid of darkness.

Repent, you might remember, means literally in Greek: to turn around, to do something differently, to think differently, or really, to think differently about everything. Light has shined in the darkness, he proclaims, and now you will have to think differently about everything. That is the message of the gospel, isn't it, that after Jesus, we have to think differently about absolutely everything. Despite the fear and the unknown, never to let the darkness win.

I remember a game that I used to play when I was a youth minister. I would create an obstacle course, blindfold them, and then ask them to complete simple tasks. As you can imagine, even with the simplest of tasks, it was nearly impossible. They would trip; they would fall. All the youth would laugh at their friends, and I guess I did, too. But the

most telling moment was when the blindfold came off and they looked around to see how simple the task was, how minimal the obstacles had been, and how close they had been so many times. How differently they would have thought about the task before them and the people around them if only they could have seen. That was the lesson—how minimal the obstacles were with just a little light—though one day I learned something more compelling.

One day, there was a young man who couldn't do it, but he refused to give up. You see, he was uncool and didn't have many friends. I think it was a rite of passage for him, that if he could just accomplish this one task the shame and fear and, yes, the darkness of adolescence would melt away. So with a stamina unknown to him, amid the laughter, he pierced the darkness. He spoke loudly and forcefully. "You know," he said, blindfolded, "if just one of you would quit laughing at me for a second and cheer for me. If one of you would care about me and help me, I might actually do this!"

The room was silent. We had never heard him talk like that. Then it happened. One young man pierced the silence and

spoke kindly, “Dude! You’re almost there. You’ve been close so many times. Just go a little to the left and you’ll have it.” And the others cheered him on. And when he did, you would have thought that he defeated the New York Yankees with a walk-off homerun. But I don’t think we were ever the same. I don’t think we ever played that game again. Those who walked in darkness, on them light had shined. And you can’t really unshine light, can you?

Despite the darkness, despite the obstacles, despite the fear, there was a word of hope spoken into the darkness. Repent, Jesus said, do differently, think differently, live differently. Because the kingdom of heaven has come near. Now you will be catching people. And now you will never be able to think of darkness the same way.

You see, I guess that is why Jesus offered the metaphor of fishing for people to describe a kind of discipleship that always brings light to dark places. Fishermen are eternally hopeful, it seems to me, almost spiritual. Just below the surface of the water exists so much more than we can see. It is a darkened world separate from ours, and yet to it belongs

so much of who we are and how we live. Those who fish seem to know a little bit more about what goes on in that other world, where the fish are, and why they are or aren’t biting. And those who fish live in hope that something of what lives just across the threshold in that world of the unseen will cross over into ours, through the thinnest gossamer of hope, the fishing line, another metaphor of how such a thin line of hope can link darkness with light.

We know a lot about darkness, but we also know what it is like when light shines, when we look, not just beyond that thin veil into the otherness of God, but also into each other, and vow to love each other, and to carry each other in God’s love, and to catch each other whenever we fall.

Repent, Jesus said. Think differently about everything. From now on you will be catching people. From now on you will never be able to think of darkness the same way.

Let us pray. Lighten our darkness, we beseech you, O Lord, and give us grace to find hope amid the darkness. And grant us grace to catch each other when we fall. Amen.