

In February 1954, a navy pilot set out on a night-training mission from an aircraft carrier off the coast of Japan. While he was taking off in stormy weather, his directional finder malfunctioned, and he mistakenly headed in the wrong direction. To make matters worse, his instrument panel suddenly short-circuited, burning out all the lights in the cockpit. The pilot could see absolutely nothing; the blackness outside the plane had suddenly come inside. Nearing despair, he looked down and thought he saw a faint blue-green glow trailing along in the ocean's depths. His training prepared him for this moment. He knew what he was seeing: a cloud of phosphorescent algae glowing in the sea that had been stirred up by the engines of his ship. It was the most desperate method of piloting a plane back onto a ship safely, but the pilot—future Apollo 13 astronaut Jim Lovell—did just that and his life was saved because of light. Not just any light, but bioluminescent organisms that live in the ocean.

Light is found in the most unlikely places. And this was true as Jesus began his ministry. In our study of the Gospel of Matthew, we've seen Jesus out in the wilderness of Judea. First, he was baptized by John and it was then the heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and the Father spoke, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Then we saw how that same Spirit led him deeper into the wilderness where he fasted 40 days and overcame an onslaught of temptation by the devil.

But here we come to an interesting thing about Matthew's gospel. As we'll see, in chapter 4, verse 12 Matthew says Jesus withdrew to Galilee and began his public ministry. Galilee was a region in the northern part of Palestine. But we know from the Gospel of John that Matthew passes over what might have been a period of nearly a year where Jesus ministered primarily in Judea to the South. It was there he met some of the men who'd become his first disciples. It was there he also performed his first miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding. There were many things Jesus did during that year which Matthew passes over. It's clear Matthew selected his material and wrote his gospel according to what he felt was most significant in Jesus' ministry and what would serve his unique audience. We see this loud and clear in the text we're looking at today. Matthew emphasizes the ministry of Jesus in Galilee because that was considered a very unlikely place for the light to come.

The Light Came to an Unlikely Place

Listen to how he starts out in verses 12-13:

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—...

There are two things that prompted Jesus to withdraw to Galilee. First, he heard John the Baptist had been put in prison. That word "withdraw" is often used in the context of danger, and it could be Jesus sensed that with John's imprisonment it wasn't safe for him to stay in Judea. Knowing his time hadn't come, he withdrew to Galilee. Or it could be with John's ministry coming to an end, Jesus saw it was time to begin his own ministry. For whatever reason this event prompted him to move his base of operations to Galilee. Specifically, he settled in the small town of Capernaum on the north shore of the lake. That lake is often called "the Sea of Galilee" though it really is just a big lake. Matthew reminds us Galilee was in the part of Israel Joshua allotted to the two tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali when the Holy Land was divided up centuries before.

But there was another, even more significant reason Jesus settled in Galilee, and that was to fulfill prophecy. Look what he says in verses 14-16:

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."**

Matthew quotes from the prophet Isaiah who wrote of the future Messiah coming to Galilee. Notice how he describes it. He calls it, "Galilee of the Gentiles." Galilee had a very diverse population. History had seen foreign conquerors make their mark on this region and that had brought an influx of people from many races. It was also a place where important roads passed through. There was a popular saying in those days: "Judea is on the way to nowhere; Galilee is on the way to everywhere."

But for the Jewish people this wasn't considered a haven. They expected the Messiah to do his work mainly in Jerusalem, not in

a place with so many non-Israelites. And notice how the people there are said to be “living (sitting) in darkness” and “in the land of the shadow of death.” Matthew wants us to know **that’s** where this great light who is Jesus went; **that’s** where this light dawned: The light came to an unlikely place.

When God visits his people, he comes to where the darkness is the greatest; where people live under the tyranny of death. In so many ways the SF Peninsula resembles Galilee. We live in one of the most strategic, influential places in the world; one of the world’s capitals for human performance. It’s been said we’re “re-inventing humanity” when it comes to lifestyle, identity, work, longevity, biology, philanthropy, politics, tolerance, transportation and education. We have one of the highest number of advanced degreed professionals in the U.S. And because of our ethnic diversity, ideas and norms transfer quickly to many other cultures of the world. This is a crossroads.

But like Galilee we’re also a very dark place. According to a study the Barna group did in June the Bay Area is the least churchied area in the country. We have epidemic levels of personal burnout. People carry the burden of fractured relationships and the inability to effectively relate interpersonally. Sexuality has become commoditized here. Our marriage failure rates are among highest in the nation. Our children are growing up in a crucible of hyper-competitiveness resulting in a suicide rate amongst teens that’s off the charts. There are huge deficits of joy, love, human interaction, and intimacy.

Someone has said this area is “defining the secular humanist gospel.” Last year in a commencement address at Harvard Mark Zuckerberg defined this gospel. He said, “The challenge for our generation is creating a world where everyone has a sense of purpose. Purpose is that sense that we’re part of something bigger than ourselves, that we’re needed, that we have something better ahead to work for. Purpose is what creates true happiness. But it’s not enough to have purpose yourself. You have to create a sense of purpose for others. There are three ways to create a world where everyone has a sense of purpose: by taking on big meaningful projects together, by redefining equality so everyone has the freedom to pursue purpose, and by building community across the world. Now it’s our time to define a new social contract for our generation. Class of 2017, you’re graduating into a world that needs purpose. It’s up to you to create it.”

In one sense he’s right in that we all need purpose, and we need a purpose that’s bigger than ourselves. But where does that purpose come from? From taking non-meaningful projects? From redefining equality? By building worldwide community? Those are all good things, but our purpose comes from a different source with a different agenda. Our purpose comes from a God we call both our Creator and Redeemer. And it’s our purpose to shine the great light of Jesus in this very dark place. We’re to

shine it in the conference rooms of Facebook, Apple and Google. We’re called to shine it in prisons, hospitals and high schools. If this is your home, and you’re a follower of Christ, that’s your calling; that’s your purpose. You’re to shine the great light on those who are living in the land of the shadow of death. That’s why we’re here as a church. That’s why our mission statement is to make and mature **more** followers of Christ. That’s why one of our Core values says this:

“In God’s scheme of ministering to this fallen world, He’s determined to work through His church. He’s commissioned His people to be His witnesses. The church is to build up its people in their spiritual lives so that, as they participate in society on any and every level, the reality of God’s love will be evident to others, and they’ll be drawn to Him. This participation will include both words and works, both evangelism and social concern.”

The Light Came With an Unlikely Message

I want you to see that this great light of Jesus came not only to an unlikely place but also with an unlikely message. Look at verse 17:

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

So here is Jesus’ message in a nutshell: He proclaims the kingdom of heaven has come near. Matthew uses the term “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God” because he wants to show respect for the Jewish tradition of avoiding the word “God.” But make no mistake, the Jewish people were waiting for a kingdom and it was God’s kingdom. They believed Messiah would come and overthrow Rome who ruled them. He’d then set up his kingdom; he’d rule the whole world from Jerusalem and establish justice and peace at last.

Now Jesus says that kingdom is near—like an express train. And those standing idly by had better wake up and get out of the way. You see, God’s kingdom meant danger as well as hope. If justice and peace are on the way, those who’ve twisted justice and disturbed peace are in trouble. They’d better change their ways while there’s time. The word Jesus used for that was “Repent!” Of course, the Jewish people of Jesus’ day largely misunderstood how that kingdom would come about. They didn’t think they needed to repent. They thought they just needed political deliverance from Rome. What they didn’t get is the Messiah in fact came to deliver them from a greater tyranny; he came to deliver them from sin, death and the devil. And the only way he could do that was through his death and resurrection.

This is the message we believe. The kingdom is near. The day will come when all the broken things of earth will be put back together; all the sad stories and songs will be rewritten; all the wars, hostilities, and places of torture will be converted to places of peace; every traumatic memory will be healed; and every tear will be wiped away. It’s coming and it’s near, like an express train.

We need to get ready for it. We need to repent and put our trust in King Jesus. That's the unlikely message.

The Light Came Calling Unlikely People

But, Jesus didn't just preach; he also called **us** to preach. The light came to an unlikely place with an unlikely message. But he also calls and sends unlikely people. Look at verses 18-22.

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. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.

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, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Again, this wasn't the first time Peter and Andrew, James and John had met Jesus. But this was a critical juncture in their relationship with him. It was at this point Jesus called them to leave everything and follow him. Later in this gospel Matthew will describe how the same thing happened to him. Matthew was a tax collector, and Jesus came to his tax booth and said, "Follow me." Matthew had been following him ever since. There are several things I want you to notice about this calling of these four men that make this unusual.

Notice, they were called **by** Jesus, not vice versa. That's unusual because back then there were a lot of so-called Rabbis going around with their own disciples. But the difference was the disciples selected who they wanted their Rabbi to be; the Rabbi never selected his own disciples. You decide one day you need a Rabbi, so you go on Yelp and read all the reviews. You pick five that look promising and you interview them all. Then you pick the one you like best. But that's not how it worked with Jesus. Here we see that Jesus called them, and in the same way he calls us. We respond to his initiative.

And just as with Matthew, we may be quite surprised by the kind of people he chooses. Fishermen? It's not that fishermen were bad; it was an honest and reliable way to earn a living. Their boats weren't much to speak of (*photo of boat*). You can see the results of excavation that was done in Galilee in 1986. The boat you see there dates back to 40 BC. These four fishermen probably were in boats much like that one. You can imagine being in that boat when one of the sudden and violent storms this lake was known for swooped down on them. But there's no question—the light came calling unlikely people.

It's interesting that with the exception of Andrew, over the next three years all of them would be among Jesus' inner circle. Peter

would be the natural leader of the Twelve. We know him as impetuous, prone to putting his foot in his mouth. James would be the first apostle to be martyred, being killed by King Herod. Then there's John, who called himself, "the disciple who Jesus loved." John wrote the fourth Gospel as well as three short letters and the book of Revelation in the back of your Bible. By the way, James and John together earned the nickname, "The sons of thunder," most likely because the two of them had a propensity to fly off the handle. At the very least we could say the people Jesus calls are ordinary men and women, fraught with all the weaknesses and worries common to all of us.

Notice they were called **to** Jesus. They were called to follow a person, not rules. This is about relationship. This is about entering into a process where we're transformed not just by knowing about him or knowing his teaching but by knowing him personally. Obedience flows from this relationship. When a child doesn't understand her father's command, the father's character plays a strong role in what happens next. A cruel father will meet resistance, but a loving and faithful father inspires trust and obedience. From this time on, they learn to trust him, obey him, and suffer with him. Notice they all just drop everything to follow Jesus. Peter and John left their nets. James and John left their boat and their father. They did it immediately. There was no hesitation; no questions were asked.

The thing that stands out to me the most here is not only are we called to discipleship, we're called to **make** disciples. Jesus doesn't just say, "Follow me," he says, "I will send you out to fish for people." I don't believe this means we should all quit our jobs and become preachers, but it does mean that in whatever your job is, you have a higher purpose than just to make a living. As you go about your life and do what normal people do, you're looking to bring people into this life-changing relationship with Jesus.

A week ago I was out jogging and somewhere along the way my phone fell out of my pocket and I didn't discover it until after the fact. So I had to backtrack and it wasn't until about a mile later I saw a homeless guy on El Camino holding my phone. As I approached him I think he knew immediately it was my phone so he started to apologize for having it. I was just so happy I found it. I offered to help him in some practical way but he didn't want anything. Then, somehow, God put a thought in my mind. It sounds kind of corny now, but I just said to him, "You know, I was once lost just like my phone, but I was found by the Lord Jesus Christ." I shared with him about the love of Jesus. He was very receptive. We had a good conversation. But here's the deal: I was just doing my thing. I was just taking a run on my day off. And God provided an opportunity for me to fish, and when God says to fish we need to fish! You're not called to just be a follower of Jesus, you're called to call others to be followers of Jesus.

The Light Came With Unlikely Power

We've seen this light shines in unlikely places with an unlikely message proclaimed by unlikely people. Finally we see that it comes with unlikely power. Look at verses 23-25.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

This is a summary statement that describes Jesus' early Galilean ministry. Jesus was a teacher; he taught in their synagogues. He was a preacher; he proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom. And he was a healer; he healed every disease and sickness, including demon possession.

This is proof that the kingdom of heaven was indeed breaking into this world in the person of Jesus. In the kingdom of heaven there's no disease, addiction or grief. With the coming of King Jesus the kingdom was breaking in with power and overcoming these things. That's what we all long for. That's why we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done." You see, when that prayer is answered, there'll be no more AIDS, no more sexual misconduct and abuse, no more opioid epidemics, no more cancer, no more hurting teenagers taking their own lives, and no more depression. That's why we, as his people, as ambassadors of his kingdom, move into these places of darkness and death with the light and the power of Jesus. And when we do that, lives will be changed and people will notice. Notice how

Matthew says news spread about Jesus all over Palestine, even north into Syria, and then east into what we call Jordan. Again, these were spiritually dark areas but the light had come and God was drawing people to his Son.

The light shines brightest in the darkest places. It comes to unlikely places with an unlikely message preached by unlikely people demonstrating an unlikely power.

Next week, as we begin to look at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we'll hear Jesus tell us, "YOU are light of the world... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." If you're a follower of Jesus will you commit yourself to being a light right where God has put you? Will you live according to values of **his** Kingdom? And will you find the dark places around you and enter into them with the good news that the King has come and the Kingdom is near?

Maybe some of you are in a dark place. Maybe you've never really come to the light who is Jesus, but you want to. I want to give you an example of what that looks like this morning. We have a brother on our staff named Ricky Wade. Ricky leads our Recovery Ministry here at CPC. I want you to listen to Ricky's story. Why? Because Ricky was in a very dark place himself and the Lord found him there and called him to follow him and now he's calling others to follow him; now he's fishing people living in their own darkness.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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