

Sermon

January 25, 2026

Matthew 4:12-25

The Light That Scatters Darkness

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever been lost in the dark? I mean really lost—not just looking for your car keys in a dim room, but genuinely disoriented, unable to see where you're going, afraid of what might be lurking just beyond your vision? That panicky feeling when you realize you don't know which way is out?

In World War II, sailors feared the night watches more than almost anything else. Even experienced navigators could lose their bearings in the pitch blackness of the Pacific, miles from land. One wrong turn, one misread star, and a ship could sail for days in completely the wrong direction. Some vessels were found hundreds of miles off course, their crews exhausted from searching for landmarks that never appeared. Darkness doesn't just hide the path forward—it steals your sense of direction entirely.

The Geography of Despair

Matthew tells us that when Jesus heard John the Baptist had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. But notice where specifically he went: "leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali." Why does Matthew care about these tribal territories? Why mention them at all?

Because these regions had a history. When the Assyrian Empire swept through Israel centuries earlier, Zebulun and Naphtali were the first to fall. Their people were the first dragged into exile, the first to watch their homes burn, the first to walk those long roads into captivity. These territories became known as "Galilee of the Gentiles"—a name that wasn't a compliment. It meant "contaminated, mixed up, not quite Jewish anymore." It was the place where hope went to die.

Isaiah had prophesied about this region: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." For generations, the people of Zebulun and Naphtali had clutched that promise like a drowning man clutches driftwood. Someday. Somehow. A light will come.

But year after year, only more darkness.

Our Geography

We know something about walking in darkness, don't we? Maybe not the darkness of exile, but we know what it's like when life stops making sense.

The diagnosis that changes everything. The pink slip that wasn't supposed to come. The phone call in the middle of the night. The empty chair at the dinner table. The addiction that keeps winning. The marriage that's dying by inches. The depression that hangs over everything like smoke.

And here's what makes the darkness so terrible: we can't fix it ourselves. We try—oh, how we try! We make plans, we work harder, we promise to do better. We tell ourselves, "If I just try hard enough, pray hard enough, believe hard enough, maybe I can turn this around." But the darkness doesn't budge. It just sits there, heavy and suffocating, reminding us that we are not in control, we are not strong enough, we are not okay.

Paul saw this same darkness in the Corinthian church. They were quarreling, splitting into factions, each group claiming to follow the right leader: "I follow Paul!" "I follow Apollos!" "I follow Cephas!" They were trying to escape their problems by choosing the right human guide, the right human wisdom, the right human solution.

Paul's response cuts like a knife: "Is Christ divided?" Has Jesus been carved up like a turkey and distributed to competing teams? Of course not! The whole problem was that they were looking for light in human wisdom, human leadership, human strength. And Paul knew—human solutions are just more darkness wearing a clever disguise.

The Word That Changes Everything

So Jesus comes to Zebulun and Naphtali. He comes to the place of deepest darkness, the place that had been waiting longest, the place where hope was almost extinct.

And he begins to preach. Just two words in Greek: Metanoeite—Repent. Turn around. Stop walking deeper into the darkness. And then: "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The kingdom is at hand. That little phrase—engiken—means "it has come near, it has arrived." Not someday, not eventually, not if you're good enough. Right now. Right here. The kingdom of God has crashed into Zebulun and Naphtali like dawn breaking over the ocean.

And watch what happens: Jesus calls Simon and Andrew from their nets. He calls James and John from their boat. He doesn't wait for them to clean up their lives first, doesn't make them prove they're worthy. He just calls—and they come. Immediately.

Why? Because when real light shows up, you don't debate it. You don't form a committee to study it. You follow it.

The Foolishness That Saves

But here's where it gets strange. Paul tells the Corinthians that God's way of bringing light looks like foolishness to the world. "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Think about that. If you were God, would you rescue the world by dying on a Roman cross? Would you bring light by letting yourself be murdered? Would you defeat darkness by descending into a tomb?

It makes no sense. It's backwards, upside-down, completely illogical.

But that's exactly the point. All our human wisdom, all our clever plans, all our attempts to save ourselves—they're just sophisticated ways of staying lost. The cross is God saying, "Stop. You're walking in circles in the dark. I will be the light. I will do the saving. I will pay the price."

On August 6, 1945, when the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima, survivors reported that for one instant, the darkness turned to blinding light. But that light brought only destruction. The light of Christ does the opposite. It enters our darkness not to destroy us but to destroy what's destroying us—our sin, our death, our slavery to the devil. Isaiah says it plainly: "The yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken."

What Jesus Has Done

And this is what Matthew wants us to see: Jesus didn't come to give us advice about finding the light. He came to BE the light. He didn't come to show us the way out of darkness. He came to carry us out on his shoulders.

When Jesus called those fishermen, he was demonstrating what he does for all of us. He comes to us in our darkness—whatever form that darkness takes—and he calls us by name. He calls us out of our old lives, our old fears, our old failures. He doesn't wait for us to have it all together. He calls us while we're still a mess, still confused, still sitting in our broken boats.

And then he gives us his kingdom. Not because we earned it. Not because we figured out the secret. But because he is the Light of the World, and wherever he goes, darkness cannot remain.

That light is still shining. Right here, right now, in this place. In the water of baptism, Jesus has called you by name and claimed you as his own. In the bread and wine of communion, he feeds you with his very body and blood—the body broken for you, the blood shed for you on that "foolish" cross. In the words of absolution, he speaks directly to your darkness: "Your sins are forgiven."

You are no longer walking in darkness, beloved. You have seen a great light. And that light is not going out. Ever.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in Him.

Pastor Ron Breight

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