

"THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS"

A little boy named Bobby entered his first science fair in second grade. Because his Mom has a green thumb, they decided to experiment with the growth of plants. He took two small green plants and placed one on a sunny windowsill and the other in a cardboard box. After a couple of weeks, Bobby checked on the two plants. The one on the windowsill had grown a couple of inches and had vibrant green leaves. The one in the box had actually grown a bit, but it had lost all of its green color, becoming almost white and its leaves drooping. Thinking that the plant might die, Bobby cut a hole in one side of the box, like this, and set the box, with the plant inside, by the windowsill ... with the hole facing toward the incoming light. Well you know what

happened ... but Bobby was so excited by this discovery!

Yes, over the course of a few weeks, the plant began to grow out through the hole! And, a couple of weeks later, it turned to grow up toward the light and even blossomed!

The plant that had been in gloomy darkness ... and was all but dead ... had seen a great light, it turned toward that light and blossomed! (Robert K. Schneider, Follow the Maker.)

The prophet Isaiah writes in the 9th chapter that bad stuff has happened to the ten tribes of Israel which live in the North. King Ahaz has sided with Assyria to take out the 10 northern tribes and to leave his land, Judah and Jerusalem, well enough alone. Assyria destroys Israel's capital, Samaria,

and takes most of the people into exile. A great darkness has fallen over the land.

It seems that many times in ancient and modern history the land of the tribes of Zebulon and Naphtali of northern Israel have been under great darkness of death and war. Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and in the modern age Lebanon and Syria with Hezbollah firing rockets into those exact regions Zebulon and Naphtali; the people there have struggled for thousands of years under the dark threat of war.

Another strike against these northern regions is that the ancient people of Isaiah's day or even in Jesus' day did not stick to the cultural or religious values prescribed by the Law of Moses. The people of the northern tribes intermarried

with the people around them, they went back to worshiping family gods including Yahweh, and their language became corrupted by the other cultures around them. Spiritually, the people had great darkness cover them as they were considered by the kingdom of Judah and the ruling class of Jerusalem as the lost, forgotten, and backwater people whom God did want anything to do with. Capernaum and Galilee was the place that if you had the bad fortune to be born in, you dreamed all your life how to leave and live anywhere else.

So more than the calling of the fisherman in Matthew, I found it quite revealing and illuminating in this season of Epiphany that Jesus withdraws from Nazareth in the south and goes and makes his home in Capernaum in the north of

the region of Galilee. Why would anyone want to go there? These people are worthless, lost, and nothing but cannon fodder between Jerusalem and Damascus. The great teachers who want to be heard, they go to the Emerald City of Jerusalem where the "real" people are...not north to Galilee and Samaria. It's like an author who wants to publish a book, instead of going on the Today Show or getting an audience with the great high queen Oprah...the author goes to a small town in Arkansas to be interviewed by the local paper.

Why does Jesus go north, why does God care about *those* people? Well, there's the question that must be answered theologically and spiritually in our hearts and minds today. Why does God choose to care about "the

small people" as the BP CEO put forth the phrase last year? Why does God bring a message of redemption to the people living on the north side of Redlands, or God forbid, the people living in that hell hole of San Bernardino? Jesus should go to Jerusalem and climb the ladder of success. Jesus should go and make a house on Sunset Hills in Redlands and live comfortably talking to the well educated, wealthy, and well to do. Not Galilee, not the north side of Redlands, or San Bernardino...what good ever came from there?

At the same time, why would Jesus ever want to be associated with you or me? All of us in this room are not famous, no one here has millions of dollars, or a great writer or director or singer or athlete...why would Jesus bother with

us? Sure, some of us are well-educated, some of us have money in the bank and a good job, some of us have even published a work or two...but we are nothing special. We gather week after week in a small building with green 1970 décor and sit on wooden benches that are too cold and listen to a volunteer amateur choir and the ramblings of a local preacher instead of an elder of the church. Why would Jesus want to be present here, set up a home base here, and be associated with you or me?

The answer comes from Jesus' response to the Pharisees in another call story from Matthew chapter 9 verses 9-13 "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man

called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this; they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' ¹²But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'"

Now I don't believe that Jesus was saying that the Pharisees were well or righteous, but that they aren't looking

for a physician to cure them, they think they are just fine. So Jesus begins with those people who know they don't amount to much in the ladder of success that society puts up. Jesus goes north, goes to Galilee and Capernaum, Jesus goes to the north side of Redlands or into the center of the ghettos and barrios of San Bernardino, or Jesus even walks into this church and brings the message of good news of God's kingdom to us.

Why? Because we are looking for a physician, we are looking for light in the midst of the dark economic times of unemployment, murders, and deep disconnection and loneliness in us or the people we know; we are like that little boy Bobby's plant in a box, our leaves have fallen off, and it

seems that the lifeblood of our souls have stopped cold...but God makes a hole, punches through our cardboard box and deep darkness and shines the sunlight of grace upon us! The plant in the windowsill didn't need something extraordinary to happen...we do!

We know the source of that sunlight, a great light of hope that shines upon us, we hear the good news of Christ that God has forgiven us, we have the assurance of His everlasting love, and God will never let us go. We have peace in our walk with the Lord that when we follow him, we walk in a new path, with new core values of success and failure, where God's life of grace is substituted for fame, big houses, and movie-star dreams.

It doesn't matter or at least it shouldn't matter to Christians if you live in a cardboard box or on Sunset Hill. Jesus demonstrates time and time again that those things don't matter, he says that it's the quality of your relationship with God and others that is important, it's the life that you spend enriching yourself and others as you serve people in ministry, it's about transformation by God's mercy not subjugation by law and who has the biggest sacrifice to give in front of others.

Jesus calls us today to follow him, to leave behind the stereotypes of Galilee, the stink of the fish and nets, the sneering of the people who think we are the small people, and be redefined by being associated with all things of

Jesus. Things like God's steadfast love, radical forgiveness, social justice, ministry, a community of people who consider themselves brothers and sisters, grace, peace, and joy...these things cannot rust, or be stolen, or be leveraged or taken by the bank. What God is saying today depends on what is most important for you and me...how we define ourselves, with what measure we use, and how we define and measure others. When your life is redefined like that, you can stand and say with Matthew and the whole church who have gone before us...a light has dawned! A great light has been shown in the darkness of our lives! Praise Jesus who has broken through our flimsy shells of darkness and revived us again!