

Galilee, where Jesus began his public ministry, was and is a green, pleasant land in the north country of Israel. It lies through a mountain pass to the north of the ancient coastal road, the way of the sea, connecting the land of Israel with its neighbors to the south (Egypt) and to the north (Assyria).

Jerusalem and Judah, to the south, are settled farther inland away from the coastal road, on a long ridge of hills more defensible. But Galilee lies wide open, in the way of conquering armies. So it was that Galilee knew all too well “the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood” (Isa. 9:5), and had become a land where people walked in darkness, called “Galilee of the nations,” “Galilee of the Gentiles” by the prophet Isaiah and the author of the Gospel according to Matthew.

Galilee was part of the Northern Kingdom of ancient Israel, separated from the south, Judah, after the death of Solomon. Two hundred years later, in the 8th century B.C.E., Galilee was conquered, with the rest of the north, by Assyria. It became the land of the Gentiles, or the nations (translations of the same word in Greek) because of an Assyrian policy of settling foreign peoples in its conquered lands, to dilute the culture, identity and coherence of the indigenous people.

Some 700 years later, Galilee was still viewed by the people of Judah and Jerusalem as not quite right, orthodox, pure. It was looked down on as a region of people of mixed heritage, a little “off,” not as good as the people of Judah. It was to Galilee that Jesus headed after he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness of Judah. He withdrew from Judah and the shadow of danger cast by Herod, when John the Baptist was arrested. Judah and Jerusalem held a darkness of their own, that they could not see in themselves, and that it was not yet time for Jesus to confront.

After rejecting the way offered by Satan—of business as usual, politics and power as usual—Jesus withdrew to Galilee and began his preaching, teaching and healing there. There, away from the center of power, the descendant of the line of David “Lion of Judah,” anointed by the Spirit, began to create a new way of being in community, a new way of understanding what is being right with God and neighbor.

If this year’s season of Epiphany were but one week longer, Easter one week later, we would hear Jesus’ first teaching next Sunday, the Sermon on the Mount, as it is known. It begins with the beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . those who mourn . . . the meek . . . those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . the merciful . . . the pure in heart . . . the peacemakers . . . those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake . . .” (Mt. 5:3-11) This was and is not a mainstream view of who is blessed in this world. Jesus taught a new way of understanding blessedness, a new way of being and being in community.

Matthew tells us that with the arrival of Jesus, the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled, that in Jesus “light has dawned” on “those who sat in the region and shadow of death . . .” His first message to a people living in darkness was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” His coming was and is a light that makes it possible for people to see and recognize that they *are* living in darkness.

Not only a darkness of our external situation—be it Assyrian or Roman occupation, the darkness of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, a shaky world economic situation—circumstances we might not have enough power or influence to change. But also the inner darkness of sin, separation from God, from ourselves, and from our neighbor, that by repentance, but turning around and re-turning to God, we could change and be changed.

“Follow me,” he said to the fishermen by the lake. Not just trail along after him through the hill towns of Galilee, but follow in his way, become like him. Become part of the new community he was forming, a community of disciples, students, who would learn from him. Because in him the kingdom of heaven—the time, place, dimension where/when everything is in accord with the will of God—in him, the kingdom of heaven has come near.

How could anyone *not* repent in response to such a call, with the kingdom of heaven so close at hand? How could anyone not turn to him? How could anyone ever choose against him and against God? I don’t know how, except that we do it over and over again, refuse him, deny him, choose against him. So that our way of following him as his disciples is inevitably a way of repenting, turning around, changing direction and re-turning, again and again.

He came to Galilee, as he comes to any place where people walk in darkness. His coming is always an invitation, a call to turn to the light and follow him. And the decision to turn and follow him matters. It is decisive, even as we go on falling into sin and repent and re-turn to the Lord.

But still there is darkness, in our own lives, and in the world. Sometimes the darkness is so immense that it swallows people up, undoes them. I do not believe for one minute that that kind of suffering is some kind of punishment because a person has not sufficiently repented or turned to the light. Some suffering, some darkness seems to be part of life in this world, without reason or explanation.

Other suffering, other darkness, though, is caused by sin, by human greed and self-interest, a collective lack of will in a world of enormous wealth to eradicate poverty and the effects of poverty. We are too intent on other things. I could go into a long rant about this, about hunger, unnecessary deaths from preventable and curable diseases, about human spirits crushed and twisted at an early age by poverty, malnutrition, and lack of education and hope. But I won’t.

I only want to say that some suffering and darkness *is* caused by sin, our collective sin, the sin of the society and the world of which we are a part. But that *we* do not have to live that way, we who are disciples of Jesus, members of the Body of Christ.

“Repent,” he said, and “Follow me,” be part of a new kind of community, with me as your head. Fish for people and build up the community organized around compassion, love, and respect for the dignity of every human being. We can organize our lives and the life of the church to prevent, or avoid causing, as much darkness as we can. When we do cause injury, we can repent, ask for forgiveness and make amends. When we are injured, we can forgive—seventy times seven, Jesus said. Love your neighbor as yourself, and love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. (Mt. 5:)

The more we live that way as a community, turning and re-turning toward the light, the less oppressive the darkness will become. We will be better able to respond to what we cannot prevent—natural disasters and sickness, as well as the darkness created by sin. We can’t fix or cure everything, but we can be more kind and compassionate, and help to make what cannot be cured more bearable.

Visit the sick and those in prison, Jesus taught. Clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give a cup of cold water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger. (Mt. 25:35-36). Be present where there is darkness, knowing that Christ himself is no stranger to darkness. He went freely into the darkness of the cross and the grave, for us.

If we go into the depths of the darkness ourselves, or as a companion on the way with another, Christ is there with us. We follow him there at some cost. But it is in braving the darkness that we are met by the healing and transforming power of his love. And we may find that even a place of deepest darkness will be redeemed and re-turned by his presence into a green and pleasant land of light and new life.

God of blazing light, through the power of the cross you shattered the darkness, scattering the fears that bind us and setting us free to live as your children. Give us courage and conviction to joyfully turn and follow you even into the darkness, in faithful service, led by the light that shines in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

(Closing prayer at the Eucharist, 113th convention of the Diocese of Washington)