

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Life is full of transitions. They are an expected part of life. Developmentally, we go from infancy through childhood and adolescence to adulthood. Relationally, we may go from being single to married to parenthood to becoming a widow. Others may be unexpected, like moving from one home or city to another. Some transitions are harmonious and don't disrupt the flow of life much, while others are much more jarring.

The latter of these transitions is found in our Gospel reading for today. "From *that* time," Matthew says, "Jesus began to preach saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Through the first four chapters of his gospel, Matthew earnestly reveals just who this Man is that comes preaching. This Jesus is the seed of Abraham and the son of David, the One whom prophets foretold and the angels proclaimed. Matthew has already quoted Old Testament prophecies five times, declaring this One to be the Messiah, beginning with that beloved prophecy of Isaiah, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us)."

Now we hear the second part of the prophecy concerning Immanuel as Matthew transitions from who Jesus is to what Jesus does. "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in great darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in this region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned." Following the forerunner's arrest, it is time for Jesus to make His move. He transitions from the wilderness and from His hometown of Nazareth to begin His ministry in Capernaum in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali.

The people of Israel didn't look too highly upon this territory. Situated in the northern region of Israel, it was through this land that the Assyrians and others would come to attack and raid. They trampled the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. The muddy boots of foreigners tainted its pure waters. And it was here that the sons of Israel mixed with an unclean people; the truth of God's Word corrupted by pagan worship. Oppression, affliction, idolatry: a people dwelling in deep darkness indeed. And yet, this is very the place Jesus chooses to come bringing His light.

And notice how Isaiah *and* Matthew speak of this land, "Galilee of the nations, Galilee of the Gentiles." This light has not come to just shine upon the children of Israel but for all the people who have dwelled in the region and, as Matthew adds, in the shadow of death. This epiphany, this revelation, this light shines for *all* people. And not just in the time Jesus walked the earth, but God very intentionally selected, and Jesus very intentionally withdrew, to *this* place to reveal a much greater truth. The whole world is covered in the darkness of oppression, affliction, and idolatry. All people live in the shadow of death.

Even here and now, death seizes our bodies and souls. Cancer, heart attacks, strokes, infections, broken bones, weak and worn out bodies and minds. Pandemics, droughts, famines, fires, and flooding trample the world. War, violence, conflict, and hatred of every type muddy the water of our hearts and make us unclean people. Doubt, temptation, fear, and false teaching corrupt our faith. A people dwelling in deep darkness indeed. And yet, this is the very place Jesus chooses to come bringing His light.

And what is the light that Jesus shines? "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' ...And He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people." First and foremost, the light which shines upon the people who dwell in darkness is this Word Jesus proclaims, the Word that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

For the reign of God breaks into human history in the person of Jesus. He breaks into our lives and drives back the kingdom of darkness, with Satan on its throne. Satan rules with an iron fist, oppressing and afflicting the people of the world through the means of sin and death. But Jesus comes to break Satan's rod and shines forth His light upon the world. And He begins restoring the trampled land and polluted waters through His Means of Grace that bring us forgiveness and life.

And as Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom, He healed all who were brought to Him, those with various diseases and pains of body and soul. Those gripped by the hand of darkness, Jesus pried free. Yet Satan tries to use even these miracles to stir us against Jesus. When the kingdom of darkness inflicts us, Satan whispers in our ears to accuse Jesus. He accuses Him of being a liar, of not loving us, of not being the light that shines in the darkness because He has not healed us and those we love.

But notice Jesus did not heal all the people in Israel. And even those He did eventually yielded to death. So does that mean Jesus failed? That darkness overcame the kingdom of heaven? No, Jesus' healings were prophetic. They proclaimed the kingdom that is coming to undo all that Satan had wrought upon the world, but they were not the fullness of the kingdom manifest. They were signs, a foretaste, the anticipation of the great and final deliverance that God will bring in Jesus when He comes again in glory. They point to that final restoration at the end of all things.

And they accompanied the Word of Jesus to reveal that first the kingdom of darkness and death would be plundered. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus healed those people to reveal the greater truth that indeed the kingdom of heaven had come upon them in Him, and that He Himself came to overcome sin and death in our place. The miracles give testimony that all people may have faith in Jesus, and believe in His victory over sin and death. Through this faith, our hearts are purified and we are restored, delivered out of the clutches of sin, death, and the devil. And with our hope and trust in Jesus, we will be partakers as Jesus undoes all that the enemies of God have done to us on the Last Day.

With the words of Isaiah's prophecy informing this transition from who Jesus is to what Jesus does, Matthew reminds Jesus is our Immanuel, our light in the darkness. And Matthew concludes His gospel with the words of Jesus, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Jesus breaks into the darkness of your life through His Word and Sacraments, purifying and restoring you from the rampage of sin, death, and Satan. Sometimes that may come with the miraculous signs pointing us onward toward that final victory, but always with that Word of promise, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

So be turned from doubt and temptation, fear and hate, false teaching and idolatry. Be turned so that you may receive the kingdom of God and eternal life, always pray in faith, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."

Until the Day that Christ comes in His glory to bring the kingdom in its fullness, Amen.