

## **A Light Has Dawned in Death**

Matthew 4:12-25

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 22, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

When God put Adam in the Garden of Eden God told Adam about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a tree that God had planted in the midst of the Garden of Eden. God gave Adam one simple command regarding this tree. He told Adam that Adam may eat from all of the trees that are in the garden, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he shall not eat for on the day that you eat of it you will surely die.

It is a simple command. It has a simple consequence if the command is broken. God commanded Adam not to eat of the fruit of the tree. God threatened Adam that if he did eat of the fruit of the tree that on the day he would eat of it, he would surely die.

Now for those of you who know the rest of the account of Adam, I ask you: did God lie to Adam? It is abhorrent to raise such a question, but raise it we must if we are to understand who and what Jesus is.

Did God lie to Adam? God had told Adam that on the day he ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would surely die. Adam did eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but he did not die on that day. In fact Genesis chapter five states that Adam lived 930 years and then he died. The book of Genesis says that Adam had other sons and daughters during that time. We know from the account in Genesis that Adam did not have children until after he had eaten of the fruit of the tree. If most of his 930 year life span was spent having children then it is safe to assume that most of the 930 years of Adam happened after he ate of the fruit of the tree. So Adam did not die when he ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He died over 900 years later.

But we also know that God is not a liar. God stated that on the day that Adam ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would surely die. If God does not lie, and Adam did not physically die on the day that he ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then God has to have been talking about some other kind of death.

The death that God was talking about is the one that separates from God. After Adam ate of the fruit of the tree he began to hide from the face of God. After Adam ate of the fruit of the tree God went walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day. When Adam heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, Adam went and hid himself among the trees of the garden. Adam is now hiding from God. Adam has now separated himself from God.

This separation from God is death. God calls it death. It is death because God is the creator and sustainer of all life. If God is the creator and sustainer of all life, then to separate oneself from Him is to die. God was not lying to Adam. Adam separated himself from the creator and sustainer of life when he ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When Adam separated Himself from the creator and sustainer of life Adam died.

You may call this spiritual death if you will. You may call this eternal death if you will. It is, nevertheless, a real death. This is not a fake death or a pretend death. Even though Adam was physically alive, because he had separated himself from the creator of life Adam was dead.

This means that people can be dead even while they are alive. This means that there are people who are physically alive, but are dead in regards to God. This also means that it is an act of sheer grace that God left Adam physically alive after he had eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good

and evil. As long as Adam was physically alive there was a chance that God could return Adam to God and make him alive again toward God.

For the sake of simplicity, let us call this death that Adam died when he ate of the fruit of the tree spiritual death. Since both physical death and spiritual death are called death they have some things in common. One of the main things that both have in common is that the ones who are dead cannot do anything about it.

A person who is physically dead cannot do anything about their physical death. They cannot make themselves physically alive again. If they do come back to life, someone must bring them back from the dead.

In the same way a spiritually dead person cannot bring himself back from the dead either. In other words a person who separated from God cannot bring God near to him. Someone must bring God near to him. Since God is not to be coerced by anyone God will have to come near to the one who is separated from God or else God will remain separated from that person. In other words a person who is spiritually dead cannot make himself spiritually alive unless God raises him from the dead.

The spiritually dead people are what Matthew's Gospel means when he talks about those who are living the land of the shadow of death.

He is speaking in chapter four specifically about those people living in Galilee. Galilee is the Roman province in the northern part of what was once ancient Israel. In ancient Israel when Joshua gave the tribes their allotment of land, the land that later generations would call Galilee was given to the tribes of Zebulon and Naphtali.

It is that part of the world in which Jesus begins His ministry. He could have begun His ministry in any part of the world and He would have found people living the land of the shadow of death. In other words He could have begun His ministry in any part of the world and He would have found spiritually dead people, who are separated from God, and could not do one thing about it.

Our Lord starts with the people living in the land of the shadow of death in Galilee. The reason that He starts with those people is because the prophet Isaiah predicted that He would and God the Father has made clear that Jesus is called by God to fulfill Isaiah's prophecies, Jesus begins where Isaiah says that He will begin, in the territory of Zebulon and Naphtali, in Galilee of the Gentiles by the sea.

And since Jesus is among them, the ones living the land of the shadow of death have had a light dawn upon them.

The light is obviously Jesus Himself. Here is what this means. Jesus is going to take action such that these people will no longer be in the land of the shadow of death. Just as when the sun rises in the east and all things become lit and bright so also Jesus comes to Galilee and those sitting in the shadow of death are illuminated.

But we have observed from Genesis that the shadow of death in which the people of Galilee are sitting is spiritual death. All of the people of Galilee are physically alive, but all of them are separate from God. As long as they continue to be separate from God, they will continue to be dead.

Jesus has come to shine the light upon them. In other words Jesus has come to make them alive. Jesus has come to make them spiritually alive. Jesus has come to end the separation between them and God. Jesus has come to change them in such a way that they no longer hide from God, but rather are willing to walk with Him in the cool of the day. When they do so, they will not only obtain their spiritual life, but they will also attain to their physical resurrection from the dead.

And so Jesus comes and shines the light on them.

And how does Jesus shine the light on them? He tells them to repent.

Jesus is not going to make anyone spiritually alive without telling them to repent. No one will be spiritually alive unless they do repent. But since they are spiritually dead none of them are going to repent. None of them will repent unless the creator comes and creates new life in them. And since the creator creates things by speaking and the thing that they need is repentance, Jesus the creator God who is now with them, Immanuel, comes to them in Galilee and in order to create repentance in their hearts speaks to them just like He spoke the creation into existence of old, He tells them, "Repent."

Since they are in the land of the shadow of death they cannot repent unless Jesus tells them to repent. Since Jesus did not have to tell anyone to repent, when He does tell them to repent it an act of grace. Jesus is the light who has dawned upon those sitting in the land of the shadow of death and He gives them life. When they repent their separation from God is over. When their separation from God is over they have new life because God is the creator and sustainer of life.

And why should they repent? Actually Jesus is not obligated to give them a reason to repent, but because His exhortation is an act of grace, He goes ahead and gives them the reason why they should repent. He tells them that the Kingdom of heaven is near and that this is why they should repent. In Matthew's Gospel the Kingdom of heaven is a euphemism for the Kingdom of God. When Jesus and others talk about "heaven" they are talking euphemistically about God.

What Jesus is saying is that God's Kingdom is being established. God has chosen to begin the establishment of His Kingdom in Galilee. When He says that the Kingdom of heaven has drawn near He is saying that it has not yet come at the time when He preaches repentance in Galilee. It is still coming. That means that Jesus is telling them that He Himself is the one who is bringing God's kingdom. If the Kingdom of heaven has come near now that He has shown up and is preaching repentance that means that when all is said and done by Jesus that the Kingdom of heaven will have come. You will have to read to the end of Matthew's Gospel for that.

Since the Kingdom of God is an everlasting kingdom those who are in the kingdom are people who have received everlasting life. Since you cannot receive everlasting life unless your separation from God has ended, Jesus comes to end the separation. He does so by exhorting you to repent and when you do so it is because He exhorted you to do so and when you do so the light has dawned upon you and your time in the shadow of death is ended. You might die physically, but you will rise again and nothing not even physical death will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus your Lord.

In order to extend this call to repentance Jesus summons apostles.

Jesus could have extended His light to all of the nations in any fashion that He wanted to. Jesus could have brought His word to you in any fashion that He wanted to. And certainly we need to have His word brought to us. As children of Adam we too live in the land of the shadow of death. We live separated from God. Since God is the author of life, even though we are physically alive unless Jesus brings His creative word into our lives we will never repent and we will stay separated from God and we will stay dead. We need to have His creative word brought to us. In order to accomplish this purpose Jesus summons apostles.

He summons four initially, Peter and Andrew, James and John. He tells them that they will no longer fish for fish, but rather they will fish for people. Understand what our Lord means when He says that to the apostles. He is giving them the authority to speak on His behalf and summon people from the dead. He will explain it in more detail later in Matthew's Gospel, but for now Jesus talks about fishing.

In this analogy that Jesus is drawing being caught is a good thing. When God catches you He restores you to Himself. When He restores you to Himself He is restoring you to the creator and author of life. When He does that you are spiritually alive again. The result is that even if you die your physical death is not permanent. You will rise from the dead.

So when the Lord tells Peter and Andrew, James and John, that they will be fishing for people He is telling them that they have the authority to bring people back to God. The apostles have the authority to say repent to people and it counts the same as if Jesus had said it Himself.

So when Peter preaches his first sermon in Acts chapter two and the people who are listening to him are cut to the heart regarding their sins and they ask Peter what they should do, Peter tells them to repent. Since those people on the Day of Pentecost were also in fellowship with Adam, they too lived in spiritual death. Like all people who live in spiritual death there is nothing that they can do about it. Unless God delivers to them a creative word which restores them to life, they are going to stay spiritually dead. So God delivers to them the life giving command to repent. When God delivers that command to the people on the Day of Pentecost, they do repent. Three thousand of them repent and are baptized on that day. Because they were previously spiritually dead, they would have not repented had God not delivered His word of repentance to them. But since God did deliver His word of repentance to them they repented. They rose from their spiritual death and began their new life with God. God delivered His word of repentance to the people on the Day of Pentecost through an apostle. His name was Peter.

Therefore even when a human speaks the word of God, it counts as God speaking. Even when a human speaks the word of God the word of God is powerful and effective and does what the Word of God says that it will do. The word of God was effective in bringing the creation into existence. The Word of God does not lose any of its effective power even when a human being is speaking it. That is why I can stand in front of you and declare bread and wine to be the body and blood of Christ and so they are because even though I, a mere human, am speaking the words the words are the words of God and they do what they say they will do. Even when I tell you to repent you repent because God told you to repent. I was only the one who was delivering the word of God. And that repentance is your new life with God. Your separation from God is over. Even though you sit in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned upon you.

Since no one speaks a word of God unless God calls that person to do so, Jesus calls His apostles to speak His words for them and spread the light of life to all places. By the way this is true for anyone who speaks the word of God according to His calling. It is true of me when I speak it according to my calling as pastor, husband, and father. It is true according to your callings as father, mother, husband, wife, and whatever other vocation God has given to you.

That word brings life. It cannot help but do so. It brings life to those who sit in the land of the shadow of death. It is the word of God so that just as Jesus shines to you in the vocations of others, particularly the apostles, so also the light of God shines through you to others.

And so the Word of God did not stay in Galilee. It was eventually in Jerusalem. Then it was in Judea. Then it was in Samaria. And finally it has now come also to you. A light has dawned upon you. And even though the Kingdom of God has already come in the completed task of our Lord Jesus Christ, even after His task is finished and the kingdom of God has come His creative, effective, powerful word to you is still the same: Repent!

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.