

***Basic Training: Light Up The Night***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Isaiah 9:1-7; Revelation 3:19-21; Matthew 4:12-17***

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight is Matthew 4:12-17. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to follow along with your bulletin insert. Let's listen to the Word of God. "When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali -- to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles -- the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

It amazes me how dark it can be on the roads at night. Even in town, there are places on Groesbeck where there aren't lights on the side of the road. Get on the interstates and places are pitch dark unless you've polished your headlights before you got on the road. I found on my trips to Oscoda at five in the morning this fall that it's just plain hard to see.

We need light to live. Light provides us with things our body needs. There's a reason why doctors prescribe vitamins to Michiganders during the winter. We need the sun! It's not just to avoid Seasonal Affective Disorder. God made us dependent on having light in our lives.

Today's passages have a lot to do with light shining in dark places. Our passage from Matthew is short; it might seem that there's not much there, but a lot is lying beneath the surface. Last week, we covered Jesus' temptation in the wilderness – Jesus faced off with the devil after a forty-day fast. Between then and now is a gap; the gospel of John tells us that Jesus ministered in Judea for a time before John the Baptist was arrested. Then John is taken into custody for confronting Herod about taking his brother's wife for himself. When Jesus hears the news, he moves back to Galilee, north of Judea, north of Jerusalem, back closer to where He's from. He's not going home, though. He's in Nazareth for a short time – long enough to pack up, at least – and then He moves to Capernaum.

Capernaum isn't the last place you'd expect Jesus to go, but it's pretty close. It's "Galilee of the Gentiles." Capernaum's always been on Israel's border. Nazareth had a Roman garrison, but Capernaum was always dicey. It was constantly under siege. Whenever you wanted to invade northern Israel, you did it through the region of Capernaum. It was far from the center of religious life in Jerusalem. People lived there because their families were there, because they owned land or businesses or something that kept them there. It was a lot like Detroit – people don't move there because they want to and they stay because they have to.

There's more. The Jewish people didn't typically choose to live by the sea. Israel is one of the only nations never to have a navy. In Jewish thought, the sea was "the deep," synonymous with the pit or the grave. There was a huge fear of the sea – which is why the Bible relates stories of fishermen panicking at storms. Capernaum is "the way to the sea" – the gateway to the abyss. Not a pleasant thought!

Why is Jesus there? For one, it's to fulfill prophecy. Isaiah 9 brings a promise that one day, the light will dawn on the region of Capernaum. This dark, dark place that's far from the center of Jewish life, far from the temple and sacrifices, an easy place to sin because no one is watching, a place where worldliness is all around, a place where being faithful to God is tough and most people aren't, this is where Jesus goes.

The passage says literally that the people are sitting in darkness. They aren't fleeing the darkness; they aren't fighting it. They're stuck in the middle of it. They've grown accustomed to it. Yet the light of Jesus is coming. The shadow of death has been on this place for centuries as war after war trampled it down. But the light of Christ is dawning; a new day has come.

And what is the message found in the light? Repent! It's the same message as John the Baptist we discussed two weeks ago. *Metanoia!* Have a change of heart and life. Turn from evil because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Forsake the darkness because the light is here. Darkness isn't anything; it's the absence of light. Now that the light is here, the only choice is either to flee the light or come running to it.

This passage doesn't seem to have much to do with it. Jesus' friend is put in prison, Jesus packs up the U-Haul, and He moves to the seaside to preach. Big deal, right? It actually is. It speaks to us about the kind of person Jesus is, and it gives us clues as to what ministry Jesus-followers (like us!) are supposed to be about. Let's go deeper.

I love how this passage paints a portrait of Jesus that's so unlike the world. *He isn't an opportunist looking for publicity and a mass of followers but a servant dedicated to the people God has chosen.* Some scholars think Jesus is retreating from danger when John is arrested, but Jesus had little to fear. Public reaction to John's arrest was very strong; later, we learn Herod is afraid of John and the public's support of him. In fact, what this did was create a huge leadership gap. John had disciples and thousands had been baptized by him, and John had prepared them for the Messiah who was on the way.

From a worldly perspective, it would have been the perfect time for Jesus to step in. He could have assumed John's place. He could have built off of John's groundwork and made His reputation in the capital city. If Jesus had been first and foremost about growing His numbers, converting the thousands, making huge waves, He would have stayed in Judea and parlayed all this to His advantage. But instead, He goes out to the edge of Jewish society where the downtrodden and deadbeats and down-and-outs were, far away from the holy rollers and the up-and-coming religionists, and that's where He shares the light of the gospel.

Jesus is dedicated to His Father and the people the Father wants Him to reach, so He forgoes the easy path and goes to Capernaum. It doesn't make sense to us, but it makes sense to God. And we can be thankful for that, because Jesus going to Capernaum means salvation for us. Jesus going to Capernaum means that the outsiders, the misfits, the sad, the sorrowful, the burdened, the indebted, the addicts, the longshoremen, the gamblers, the stuck, the poor...we all have a place in the Kingdom if we only come to Jesus.

Friends, if we have any question whether we're good enough for the Kingdom or not, it's clear – we're not. But it's not an issue of good or bad. It's a matter of responding to Jesus' invitation to the Kingdom. Jesus chose two obnoxious fishermen nicknamed the "Sons of Thunder" because of their antics for best friends. He made a corrupt IRS agent one of his buddies. His treasurer stole from the money bag. The disciples continually made a mess of things. Yet He loved them and chose them to be His companions for three years. And He calls us out of our messes to become His disciples, too.

God is calling CrossWay to do His work in the coming year, and that will lead to growth. That will happen as we talk to people about what the church has done and what God is doing through us. He is calling us to be a church to the churchless. Jesus didn't go after the people who were already in the temple courts every day seeking God. He talked to those who had no hope and brought them hope. He brought them Himself, the light of the world. We can take that light to those around us who don't have it.

As CrossWay grows in the next year, there are folks who are naturals for us to reach. One group that has come to mind are newcomers – those who aren't from here. I've lived here for six years, and I still find it hard to break into social groups. Many groups of friends have been together since middle school and high school. The assumption is that "everyone's from here." People tell you they aren't from here if they live in Macomb Township but grew up in Roseville. But it's hard to find your bearings if you aren't from the Detroit area. I encourage you to look for the newcomers and welcome them.

From Jesus' example in Capernaum, I also think that we are called to be a church for the broken. Most churches look and sound perfect. They put up a great front. We shouldn't do that. We are broken too. I look around at us and I see people who've been ill. People who've lost loved ones. People who've been lied to and cheated on and divorced. People who struggle to live a life pleasing to God. People who sin. People who have made mistakes in their pasts that still affect us now. I see many of those things when I look in the mirror. Jesus went to the broken. He brought them spiritual healing through His message, His teaching, and His love. He's still doing it in us; He's still healing us. We don't need to worry about who we invite to our church or our events and whether or not they fit. Are they broken in some way? Then they fit. They are us. They are the people Jesus went to minister to in Capernaum.

And that leads into another insight about Jesus: *Jesus goes to those in need.* Jesus could have picked up a few thousand of John's followers and put together a huge following. He could have set up shop in Jerusalem and had people flocking to Him. He could have decided it was easier to hang a shingle outside His home in Nazareth and made people come to Him.

But instead, He goes to the far corners of Jewish society and brings the message of salvation to those on the outs and outskirts. Jesus is so out there with people that He tells those who would follow Him, "birds have nests and foxes have holes, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." He didn't have a permanent residence; He stayed with friends often, like Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha, but He was out among people on a regular basis.

And what's funny about that is that He's not what we would call a "people person." He goes off by Himself for extended periods without a single other soul to pray and be alone. There are points in His ministry where He sends the people home. He's so disinterested in having people follow Him for His miracles that when they try to track Him down after He's left them, He challenges them so strongly that they decide He's not worth the effort. Yet He's among them. He was known to them.

The day of building churches and watching them fill up with Christians in the neighborhood is gone. It was a bad habit we got into in America, and that model is dead. It made us complacent. It brought in the faithful while it left the agnostic and the doubter and the person who'd never heard out in the cold. They could come to us, but we didn't come to them. The American church has often missed out on its responsibility to reach out to those who weren't yet followers of Christ. We have the opportunity to do that. And quite frankly, CrossWay will eventually cease to exist if we don't do it.

As we move forward, the elders of the church and I have been looking at places to make a more permanent home for CrossWay. We want to be near neighborhoods. We probably won't have a lot of space. It will be a place to worship, to study, to fellowship and grow, but it will primarily be a place to be equipped for ministry, not a retreat from the ministry we need to do. We'll hear the Word of God together, and the Spirit will give us the tools and the grace we need to go out and meet the needs of our community.

For the time being, I encourage us all to be listening to the voices in our local community. Where do the community's needs and our passions and talents and God's message of hope come together? I know a few things about computers. Maybe it's offering inexpensive repair services, free classes on computer skills and how to protect your family from some of the pitfalls of the Internet, and introducing them to Christian concepts. Maybe you have teaching gifts; we might offer to help the community with tutoring, all the while sharing the love of God with them. Maybe it's supporting those in grief, or widows, or those going through divorce. Maybe it's providing a place for people in the community – there aren't a lot of gathering places in Macomb Township.

But the only way we'll know what's needed is to speak to people, to listen, to be a friend. That can be hard. I know it's difficult to make friends – it's difficult to know where to begin. There's no public square where people are looking for a conversation and a discussion any more. But God is still moving and calling people to Himself. There are a lot of lonely people out there who don't know anybody cares about them. If we go to them, we have the chance to speak about God's love for them.

And what do we say? *We preach the good news that Jesus preached, the same news that John preached – repent. Metanoia.* You know, John and Jesus were totally different. John was a wild-looking guy who ate locusts and dressed like an ancient prophet. Jesus fit into most crowds, and when the Pharisees complained about Him, it was because He ate and drank with normal people with normal problems and difficult sins to address in their lives. Different preacher, different look, different voice, same message – change, for God's Kingdom is at hand.

This makes us nervous. We haven't seen street preachers for twenty, thirty years, most of us, out on a soapbox yelling "repent!" But a lot of us still have the message etched in our minds that was so popular – "turn or burn." We were told that if we didn't repent, if we didn't have terrible sorrow over our sins and beg for forgiveness, we were destined for an eternity of punishment. I'm not saying there isn't a hint of truth to that; we do have to ask for forgiveness; we do have to turn from our sins; there will be judgment of those who refuse to turn to God. But fear isn't a motivator for those who don't believe that God exists. And sometimes we think that's what Jesus was doing – making people fearful.

But that's not it! Matthew writes that in the darkness a light has dawned; the shadow of death is wavering in the brightness of Christ. Where once there was no hope, hope is dawning. That is the message that Christ is proclaiming – change your heart and mind toward God. Point yourself away from sin and toward your Creator. Be transformed.

The fantastic news, the great news, the message of Jesus and John, is that transformation is possible. The Pharisees didn't believe that. They were comfortable labeling people in categories that would never change. They hated that Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners of all sorts. They didn't believe that anyone *could* change. And you know what? Without Christ, they'd be exactly right. People may change an action or two, trade one habit for another habit, but they don't truly change spiritually unless God gets ahold of them. But Jesus said, "Change!" And through trusting in Him, it can happen. We can be made new.

That's the message we take with us out to our friends and neighbors, out to the community. Change can happen because of Jesus and the forgiveness He extends to us. That's the news people need. Most people don't need to hear that God dislikes what they do; they already know that. Most people aren't happy with their lives now but they see no way out. It doesn't depend on income or how bad our habits are or what positive or negative things have happened to us. We push down our negativity, but many people in the world are desperately unhappy. They live in darkness. They don't see change as possible.

Our message to them is, change your heart toward God. Believe the good news that Jesus came to reconcile you to God. Have peace and joy and love in your life. They are yours for the taking, not because you've earned them, not because you've worked hard for them, but because Jesus gives them to us as a free gift when we simply trust in Him. Our message to the world is that change is possible, your life can be what God intended it to be, and it comes with faith in Him. We don't have to convince anybody. God is already working. He is already convincing people that they need Him. We just have the privilege of arranging the introduction.

This is the second week of our Basic Training series, and I think that what we've studied tonight is foundational to our growth as believers and as faithful followers of Jesus. Jesus is dedicated to us and went to people who needed Him. He went to them, with the good news that a change of heart and mind toward God is possible. He brought Himself to them, the light of life, the light that shines in the darkness, the light that brightens up the darkest road. May we follow in His footsteps, sharing with a world in need that He is alive and well, and that He desires to change us into something holy and incredible in His sight.