

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

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Sermon: “*Step into the Light!*”

Isaiah 9:1-4 (The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light)  
Psalm 27:1, 5-13 (The Lord is our light and our salvation)  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18 (Paul pleads for no divisions among the congregation)  
St. Matthew 4:12-23 (Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy as a Light unto all nations)

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I love sunlight. It's so warm and comforting. It lifts my spirits. I even love moonlight and the light from distant stars, because of their beauty, and the visual reminder they provide of our Creator's power and artistry. But when it comes to those little display lights on every gadget in our bedroom, I'm not as fond of them when I want a good night's sleep. The Internet router blinks, blinks, blinks a white LED signal. The landline phone in its socket looks as if it has 3 red eyes in the darkness. The cable box and VCR glow with bright green digits. The Dyson stick vacuum in its charger throbs with a brilliant blue syncopation, and Rick's alarm clock beams out large scarlet numbers.

I got to thinking, if I could have only one source of light, what would it be? Sunshine? No other light can match its intensity and the sense of wellbeing it delivers. Or would I opt for the steadiness of electric light? With electricity I could see and read at all times, even at night. And I could use it to power my computer, fridge, and range. Or would I choose the soft, warming light of natural gas?

Which light would you choose if you could only have one? Before you decide, think back to the words of today's Gospel lesson. There, we heard about yet another light, a great light that blazed across Israel. Jesus is that light and we'll be reminded this morning why He is the best light, the one light we dare not be without. For without Jesus, we would end up lost in *everlasting* darkness.

From St. Matthew, we heard about what Jesus does when he finds out that John the Baptist has been imprisoned by King Herod. Like a soldier who rushes to fill the gap when a comrade on the front lines takes a bullet and falls to the ground, Jesus steps into the breach left by John's arrest. He moves from the small town of Nazareth, where He had spent most of His childhood, to Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. It was an intentional decision to fulfill the 700-year-old prophecy of Isaiah: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned” (Matt. 4:15-16).

This region of Israel, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali—named after the two tribes of Israel who had settled there—had a dark reputation. Since it was in the north, it was the first place invading armies coming from that direction would strike. The area had become a doormat on which powerful nations wiped their combat boots. It would be like living within sight of the Israeli/Palestinian border today, where you never know when a stray rocket or bullet will speed your way screaming “Death!”

But there was another darkness covering this land that was even more dangerous than the tip of a soldier's spear aimed at one's heart. Since this part of Israel had been overrun so many times by non-Jews, many of them started to settle there and brought their pagan religions with them. This influence, as well as the fact that the Israelites who still lived there were far from the Temple in Jerusalem, had caused many to lose their faith in the one true God, such that they went about life on their own terms. They were lost in *spiritual* darkness.

It was to this dark place that Jesus went, and, in the words of the prophet Isaiah it was as if a great light had dawned upon Zebulun and Naphtali. But exactly in what way was Jesus a light? Our text says, “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’” (Matt. 4:17). Jesus shone God's light through the message He delivered: “Repent! Turn away from your sins!”

Is this the message the world today wants to hear from Jesus? “Repent! Forsake your sins!” Many believe Jesus only came to deliver a message of peace and acceptance: “Hey everyone, just keep on doing what you're doing, God's OK with it and so am I.” After all, doesn't Jesus love *everyone* and want them to stay just

the way they are? No! Jesus came as a light to expose sin the way a flashlight shining under your bed illuminates all the dust bunnies and who knows what other nasty things have been hiding in the darkness there.

But we shouldn't think of Jesus like a flashlight that is shone in our face to blind and embarrass us. Jesus is the kind of light your companion provides when he shines his flashlight down at your feet so you can avoid tripping over the roots and rocks on that romantic, late night walk through the woods.

What are the roots and rocks that Jesus exposes for us with the light of His Word? With His comments about marriage, he makes it clear that this institution is to be between one man and one woman. By urging the woman caught in adultery to go and "sin no more" Jesus illuminates how intimacy outside of marriage, even if it is between two consenting adults, is a sin that requires forgiveness.

Jesus also points out that when I'm stingy with my money and my time it reveals how much I care for myself and how little I care for others. What makes this sin of greed so offensive is that its root is our lack of trust in God's promise to provide for us. And so we move through life like squirrels getting ready for winter, hiding all our assets away so we can retire well or travel. Forget the needs of others! "Let someone else take care of them," we sniff.

In light of what Jesus exposes—sin, sin, and more sin—it's surprising to hear what else Jesus said in His preaching. Matthew reports: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom..." (Matt. 4:23a).

Not only had Jesus come to throw a spotlight on sin; He also came to highlight God's love and mercy—good news for sinners to hear. And that good news wasn't, "If you clean up your act, God will forgive you." That's just a recipe for more guilt, because I cannot clean up my act to match God's standards any more than I can clean up all the nuclear waste, or land-, water-, and air-pollution in the world.

Jesus' good news was that He, the Son of God, came to fix, scrub, and polish people who were each guilty of committing the deepest cesspool of sins. It would kill Him to get it done. But He would do it gladly. Yes, Jesus is the greatest and best light, the only light that leads to an eternal life of joy and peace in heaven.

I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon how much the excess of digital display lights annoys me at night. I even put a dark sock over the blinking signal on my desktop computer that indicates it's running. But a couple of years ago, that flashing stopped. My computer had died. It took some time to get a new PC and have all the data transferred properly from the old hard drive. Those of you with computers know what it's like to be without word processing and the Internet. You can't do any work. You can't send or receive email. You can't get answers to questions you're used to finding with a few clicks of the mouse. It feels like you're cut off from the world!

If you understand that minor anguish, take that feeling and multiply it by infinity. That's what it would feel like to be cut off from Jesus, come Judgment Day. For without Christ lighting our lives, we will lose far worse than a Wi-Fi connection. We'll lose our only connection to never-ending life in heaven.

It might not seem like a big deal to need the light of Christ, because life goes on whether or not we've done our daily devotions or had our Sunday Word and Sacrament. But a consequential life, either here and now, or in eternity, cannot be had without the Savior. Perhaps that idea was embedded in what Jesus said to His first disciples, when He pledged to make them fishers of people (Matt. 4:19). Because, without Jesus, that's what we are like: fish aimlessly swimming around with no apparent direction. It's only when Jesus catches us in the net of His truth and His love that we gain the purpose for which God created us. Only then do we see that life is not about ourselves but about serving Him who died for us.\*

In Psalm 89:15 (GNV), we read: "Blessed are the people that can rejoice in thee: they shall walk in the light of thy countenance, O Lord." Dear friends, a great light, the *best* light, is shining on us in the person of Jesus. And, like the blinding light of a laser that cuts away disease, Christ is shining on you for the renewal and restoration, the wholeness and healing, of your soul, spirit, mind and body. Just catch the rays of His love. No SPF 50 needed. Step into His light and soak it up! *Amen.*

\*Adapt. Daniel Habben, "Jesus is the Best Light," 27 January 2014, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/jesus-is-the-best-light-daniel-habben-sermon-on-jesus-the-light-182528) < <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/jesus-is-the-best-light-daniel-habben-sermon-on-jesus-the-light-182528>> 13 January 2023.