

Morning Service | 2nd Jan | Matthew 4:12-25

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[0 : 00] We read from Isaiah chapter 9, roughly 732 BC. I'd like to read now from Matthew chapter 4, roughly 28, 29 AD.

Matthew 4 at verse 12. And you see, Matthew, the author, is capturing this beginning of Jesus' ministry, the first sermon.

And he connects the ministry of Jesus and the message of Isaiah seamlessly. So Matthew chapter 4 at verse 12, and I'll read to the end of that chapter.

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 of the sea along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people living in darkness have seen a great light.

[1 : 10] 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.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men. At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John.

They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

[2 : 15] News about him spread all over Syria. And people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases. Those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.

Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region across the Jordan followed him. Amen. Amen.

And may God add to this reading of his word, his blessing. So we have this great text, this great promise of Isaiah chapter 9, fulfilled, yes, in the incarnation, the birth of Jesus.

But notice that the gospel writer Matthew connects the fulfillment of the promise with the commencement of Jesus' preaching.

That not only has he been born, but now he is beginning to preach. And that great promise that was recorded seven centuries earlier is being fulfilled.

[3 : 22] Crowds of people from all different places, all different backgrounds are coming to him. And finding the fulfillment of that promise.

You see, our God keeps his word. He makes and he keeps promises. And his timing is perfect timing. Now, on my computer, when I log on, I get a notification.

And the notification is, on this day in history. I love history. I love, and I was reminded yesterday that on the 1st of January, 1863, I should have known this, but I had to be reminded.

But on that day, the Emancipation Proclamation came into force. Abraham Lincoln, a few months earlier, had declared.

And he declared powerfully. He said that on the 1st day of January. See, this is in September. And he's looking ahead 100 days. He says, on that 1st day of September, in the year of our Lord, 1863, all persons held as slaves within any state or designated part of a state, the people whereof then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.

[4 : 50] A proclamation of freedom that would take effect 100 days in the future. And when that proclamation was issued, it was issued not just as words, but as words accompanied by power.

And that's exactly what God's word is. Words accompanied with power. Because God has the power to achieve what he promises. So in 1863, on the 1st of January, the proclamation commenced with these words.

Now, therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States.

So he is saying, on this day, anyone held as a slave in these states will be then, thenceforward, and forever free.

So it is a proclamation of freedom accompanied with all the power and the authority that he has as the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army and the United States Navy.

[6 : 03] Turn with me for a moment back to Isaiah chapter 9. And let's grasp something of the promise that is given and something of the power that accompanies this promise to see how God has a way of bringing into effect a message of hope, a message of encouragement, and a message of enthusiasm.

And if you can leave with those three words in your mind at the start of this new year, hope, encouragement, and enthusiasm, then I think the message of Isaiah will be rooted in our hearts, in our minds, and we can look to see God working out his plan and his purpose.

So we come to chapter 9, and if we want to emphasize hope, encouragement, and enthusiasm, it's a strange commencement, isn't it? Because we have a motif here, and this motif is characterized by three words that each begin with the letter D.

The first word is defeat, the second word is darkness, and the third word is death. Not a promising start for a promise, is it?

Defeat, darkness, and death. At the beginning of chapter 9, nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who are in distress. In the past, he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.

[7 : 37] It's interesting that Matthew, when he begins to quote Isaiah 9, he quotes from the beginning, and he mentions Zebulun, and he mentions Naphtali, these places in the northern part of Israel, of the kingdom of Israel.

And this is a place, and this is why we have an insight into the rough date of Isaiah 9, is because in 732 B.C., the Assyrian Empire began to conquer the north.

The Assyrians began to conquer these lands, and to absorb these lands into their empire. So this is a period of time where the people of God are experiencing defeat, and they are experiencing distress.

Now, in the ancient Near East, the predominant empire at this time was the Assyrian Empire.

If you remember in Isaiah chapter 6, the year that King Uzziah died, this was a good time for Judah. It's often called a golden age of Judah. But even that is a far cry from the real golden age which existed under Solomon.

[8 : 53] Solomon's reign, the empire that Solomon built, was the largest that the combined nation of Israel and Judah had together, the United Kingdom had.

Ever since Solomon's time, it was a time of decline. And by the time of Isaiah chapter 9, the decline is obvious. The enemies are getting stronger, and the people of God are getting weaker.

Now, it's interesting that Isaiah doesn't even mention the Assyrians by name. Doesn't mention them as a nation. Doesn't mention their emperor.

This happened to be Tiglath-Pileser III. Now, like yourself, we're all interested to some extent in the history of the ancient Near East. But there are weeks that go by when I don't even think of the Assyrian Empire.

There might be months that go by where you don't give that empire a second thought. You see, that empire is a footnote now in history. It was a big deal at this time, but it's no longer a big deal.

[10 : 00] You see, empires rise and empires fall. The Assyrians had all power and all authority so much that their emperor would sign decrees. There was a later king called Ashurbanipal.

He would sign his decrees. I am Ashurbanipal, the king of the world, the king of Assyria. Because it was true, if you were king of Assyria, you were effectively king of the known world.

And now we don't think much of the Assyrian Empire. We don't remember Ashurbanipal or Tiglath-Pileser III, but we remember Jesus. Because Jesus, the one promised here, is the king.

And his empire is not an empire of time or of place, but his empire expands across ages, across generations, so that this promise given 2,700 years ago has now found its fulfillment in time, in place, but also in experience.

You see, this isn't just a study in ancient history. This is a present reality for the people of God. Because we read these promises, and we read these guarantees that God gives us about himself and about us.

[11:19] So it's a time of defeat. The Assyrians are on the rise, and Israel is on the decline. It's a time of darkness, the people walking in darkness. And it's not only dark, but it's deep darkness, in the second half of verse 2, on those living in the land of the shadow of death.

Darkness is so deep that it's like the words that we sang in Psalm 23. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. So darkness is deep, and death is near.

So that's the motif. Death. Defeat, darkness, and death. But the remarkable thing is that when light shines, darkness disappears.

And we're told that a light is shining, and it's a bright light. And you see, the first point I want to make here is that at just the right time, at just the right place, in just the right circumstance, God shows up.

Unexpected, in many regards. Surprising, by many accounts. But yet, God shows up at just the right time, in just the right place, at just the right setting.

[12:35] When you would least expect it, there he is. And you see, this scene of darkness, this scene of defeat, this scene of death, is transformed by light, is transformed by the arrival of one who will soon be described, a son, a child.

So this darkness now is dispelled. This defeat is somehow being unraveled. Why? Because light has come. As you read, the opening verses of John's Gospel were told, in him was life, and that life was the light of men.

Jesus enters this world of darkness, and he brings light. Jesus enters this world that is characterized by death and defeat, and he brings victory, and he brings life, and he brings joy, and he brings peace.

So this scene is now transformed at just the right time. Now, I mentioned the Emancipation Proclamation, and there was a hundred-day gap.

The president makes a promise, and he says, in a hundred days, this will be the case. It's not a hundred days. It's over 700 years between the promise and the fulfillment.

[13:49] And you think that's quite a long time. That's quite a long wait. Well, God's timing is perfect timing because he is infinitely wise, he is infinitely great, he is infinitely good, so this promise was intended to keep the people of God going.

And sometimes we need that promise to keep going. Our circumstances, if we look at our circumstances, we are attempted to distress and despair.

But when we turn to God's word, there we have an ample supply of hope, an ample supply of comfort, an ample supply of encouragement.

So this opening motif, death, defeat, and darkness, now light is shining. Verses 3 and 5, again, we see this transformation taking place.

Verse 3, So now we have a new scene.

[15:01] Instead of defeat, darkness, and death, we have increase, multiplication, joy, and celebration. How has this happened?

How is this possible? You see, this is a time when the people of God are experiencing not increase, but decrease. They're not experiencing addition, they're experiencing subtraction.

The land is reducing. Why? Because the northern neighbor, Assyria, is advancing south. And it's not going to be too long before the whole northern kingdom disappears, absorbed into this vast empire.

But God says that's not the case. You see, God is at work in multiplication. Now you might remember, maybe some of you younger people here are taking maths at school.

You might remember that there's what's called a progression, an arithmetic progression. When you go 2 and 4 and 6 and 8, you add 2 plus 2 plus 2 plus 2.

[16:08] And you see that's a steady progression. But if you have what's described as a geometric progression, you go from 2 to 4 to 8 to 16 to 32. It's a multiplication.

Something that's small becomes very big very quickly. And this message that Isaiah is delivering to the people seems so unusual because the writing is on the wall.

We have a northern neighbor that's far more powerful than us. We are not getting bigger, we are getting smaller. There's not light, there's darkness, there's not hope, there's despair, but God is saying a time is coming and a time is coming where the nation will expand and expand rapidly. You see, God has a way of multiplying. Let me give you an example. For over a hundred years, there was an intensive effort to bring the gospel to the nation and to the people of China. Hudson Taylor, China Inland Mission for one, but many Western organizations and Western missionary organizations sent people to China.

[17:18] By 1949, it was estimated that there was one million Chinese Christians. And in that year, Chairman Mao expelled every Western missionary, expelled every Western mission organization, and the thinking was quite understandable.

This is a Western faith. If we get rid of the Westerners, if we get rid of the Western money, this faith will soon disappear. Something remarkable happened.

In those next 60 or 70 years, the church of one million probably by estimation became a church of a hundred million. One Chinese Christian person in 1949, there's now a hundred.

That's what multiplication looks like. When God takes something that looks small and he says, I'm going to make it big. I'm going to make it big in the circumstances that you would think is impossible.

The resources, the personnel, everything that you would expect is necessary. God says he can work in ways that we can never understand or predict.

[18:29] So I want us to begin this year with optimism. I want us to see what God is able to do and I want us to see what God has promised to do and how God can take a situation that seems hopeless and bring multiplication and bring increase and bring joy.

Because the language of these verses is the language of Egypt. It's the language of oppression. It's the language of slavery. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

God has a way of removing and transforming. He removes the oppressor. He transforms the circumstances of his people.

So instead of being a captive people, they're a free people. Instead of being an oppressed people, they are now a joyful people. And even that mention of Midian, remember the account and judges of Gideon?

The first time we encounter Gideon, what is he doing? He's threshing wheat in a wine press. Why is he threshing wheat in a wine press?

[19:49] Because the Midianites are plundering the harvest. They're taking everything away. So if you want to preserve what you have, you need to hide it.

And Isaiah is saying, you remember what happened in Midian, when Midian was the enemy, you remember what happened in Egypt. God intervened. God intervened at just the right time, in just the right situation, and he transformed the circumstances of his people.

And this is why it's so important to study the history of the past. Because we see what God has done, and we see what God can do, and we are then given comfort and encouragement for today and for tomorrow.

And as you read through this passage, you might notice that the verbs that are used, because Isaiah is talking about the future, but strangely he uses past tense verbs to talk about the future. We don't do that normally. If I tell you I'm going home to have lunch and I will have, you know, I will use words like will. You know, when I describe the future, I don't talk about past tense events, but Isaiah is so confident, or in this word, in this message, that he's presenting something as if it has already been achieved.

[21:14] That is how reliable God is. You can take his word to the bank, and you'll never be disappointed. You'll never be discouraged.

So instead of slavery, instead of hardship, instead of suffering, we have here a picture of joy, a picture of abundance, a picture of freedom, a picture of security, a picture of safety.

You see, God has a way of changing our circumstances and transforming our status. The 1st of January, 1863, the President of the United States declared those that were held in slavery to be free.

And from that point forward, they were free. Because he said it, he meant it, and he accompanied his proclamation with power. God is describing his people now, no longer as slaves, no longer as in danger, no longer in distress, but a people who are to be characterized by joy, by celebration, and by increase and multiplication.

salvation. And as we come then to the final portion of this passage, how is it possible that this transformation can take place?

[22 : 34] How can a scene of defeat, of captivity, of suffering, of darkness and distress, how can that situation be transformed?

Verse 6, for to us a child is born, to us a son is given. There is one who comes and who achieves and fulfills and provides and enables the impossible to be possible.

Isn't that the refrain that we often see throughout the Bible? With man, this is impossible. With us, this is impossible. Your circumstances today might seem to be impossible.

The despair, the distress, the discouragement. The Bible is not a self-help book. Whatever it is, it's not that. Because the help that we need does not come from ourselves.

If we could help ourselves, surely we would have helped ourselves by now. The help that is described here is not coming from the people, but is coming from God for his people.

[23 : 43] A child, a son. And we're told that the government will be on his shoulders. Think of that image. The government of the world rests upon the shoulders of this child, this son, which means that he can carry a heavy load.

You and I cannot carry heavy loads. We are often burdened or weighed down or oppressed. And that's why when you think of the ministry of Jesus, we look at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Matthew, if you read through just a few more chapters, you'll come to the end of Matthew chapter 11, where Jesus says, come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Now, how is he able to say that? He's able to say that because he can carry the whole world on his shoulders. He is that strong. He is that powerful. So that which crushes us has no impact on him because he is that strong, that great, and that mighty.

So not only does he carry the government, we're told that he is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Wonderful Counselor. In this city, there's a counseling service called New Growth Counseling.

Louise McMillan and colleagues provide Christian counseling for people who have problems.

[25 : 15] Many different kinds of problems, many different kinds of situations, and there's a huge value in Christian counseling of talking with someone who can help you see or maybe work through problems, but any counselor will tell you that they encounter situations that are beyond them.

They've never seen this kind of problem, they don't know what to say, but the counselor that we have in the sun, in the child, never encounters a problem that is too great, never encounters a difficulty that is too complex.

This counselor never needs advice, this counselor never needs wisdom because he has all wisdom and all knowledge. We're describing him here also as mighty God or as a warrior God.

Now the Assyrians were a warrior empire, but our God fights for us, and he can defeat any foe, he can thwart any enemy. So when we have him on our side, we not only have all wisdom, we have all strength.

And not only do we have a God who is mighty and a God who is wise, but we have a God who is relational by his very nature. He knows us, he loves us, he makes us part of his family.

[26 : 34] You see, there's a change of status. The captive people have become free. The people in distress have become joyful. But those who are separated from God now become part of God's family.

It's interesting that here one of the titles given to the Son is Everlasting Father. Now this doesn't mean that, this doesn't conflict with our understanding of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But the title here is one who has no beginning, one who has no end, and one who looks upon us as a member of his family with care, with concern, and with compassion.

So the mighty God, the warrior God, is Everlasting Father. And he's Prince of Peace. In an age of warfare, God is a God who brings peace.

In an age of military defeat, a God who brings victory, but a God who declares peace. Another anniversary that passed in December, December 7, 1941, was the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Empire, and war commenced.

[27 : 43] Human beings can declare war, but only God can declare peace, because his declaration is accompanied with the power to achieve peace. And we're told that this peace and his government will extend and extend and extend.

The 20th century was the most successful century for the missionary enterprise of the Christian church. We might not realize that, but it is. That 100-year period was the most successful period of Christian evangelization since the book of Acts.

The 21st century has the ability of being even greater in terms of more people being reached with the gospel. Just to give you a statistic that is remarkable, in 1900, the high water mark of the Western missionary endeavor, there were 10 million Christians on the continent of Africa, 10% of the population.

By the end of the 20th century, there were 360 million Africans on the continent of Africa, half of which were Christians.

This is the largest shift in religious affiliation that has ever been identified anywhere at any time. This is what God does when he extends his kingdom.

[29 : 08] I mentioned the word enthusiasm, and with this I want to close, because at the end of this great promise, we're told that the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this, that God has an intense commitment to fulfill his own promise.

and he fulfills that promise with great zeal, with great enthusiasm, with great intensity. And I would like to suggest that as this year commences, that we might hope to share something of this enthusiasm.

So I want you to be optimistic, not pessimistic. I want you to have hope and not despair. I want you to reflect on light and not darkness, but I want you to consider what it means to be enthusiastic. We all have different temperaments. Some of us are half empty people, some of us are glass half full people, but I want us to be enthusiastic if we are Christians. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a great essayist in America, put it this way.

He said, enthusiasm is one of the most powerful engines of success. When you do a thing, do it with all your might. Put your whole soul into it, stamp it with your own personality, be active, be energetic, be enthusiastic and faithful, and you will accomplish your object.

[30 : 30] Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. There's a zealous enthusiasm of God that not only does he promise, but he achieves. Not only does he make commitments, but he fulfills those commitments.

And I think there should be something of that enthusiasm in the people of God. Let me give you just one example. In the early part of the 18th century, the 1700s, the cause of Jesus was at a very low ebb in the United Kingdom, in the American colonies.

It was exactly the opposite. It was exactly the time in which you didn't expect much to happen because not much was happening. But God raised up a generation of preachers, of pastors, of evangelists that brought the gospel to the United Kingdom, to England, to Scotland, to Wales, to Ireland, to the United States, at just the right moment when things seemed to be going from bad to worse.

And these preachers were described as enthusiasts. But that wasn't a compliment. They were described as enthusiasts in religion. And religion wasn't meant to be enthusiastic.

Religion was something that you had in your private life, and you kept that privately. But people like John Wesley or George Whitefield became enthusiasts for the gospel. Whitefield once said, other men may preach the gospel better than I, but no man can preach a better gospel.

[32 : 02] John Wesley, his contemporary, said this, he said, catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come for miles to see you burn. George Whitefield traveled many times to the United States, to the U.S.

colonies, and on his last journey there, it was clear that his life was coming to an end. He was only in his 50s, but still it was obvious that he was growing weaker.

And on one evening, it was the 27th of September 1770, a friend said, sir, you are more fit to go to bed than to preach. And George Whitefield replied, true, sir.

But then he prayed, Lord Jesus, I am weary in thy work, but not of thy work. I have not yet finished my course. Let me go and speak for thee once more in the fields.

Seal thy truth and let me come home and die. He stood on a barrel and preached for two hours that evening. When he went to bed, he said, I would rather wear out than rust out.

[33 : 05] This was in the Massachusetts colony. That next morning, he died and was buried there in the United States. That's what enthusiasm looks like, going forth in the name of Jesus with the sure promise of the gospel, knowing that God's word will always be fulfilled, God's promises are always yes and amen, and God has a way of using ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things so that all the credit, all the praise, all the honor is his.

So we have hope today in Jesus, the son, the child. we have hope in his gospel, even that portion of chapter 4 in Matthew that we read.

All different kinds of people, with all different kinds of problems, from all different kinds of places, came to him and each one was healed. That's his power, that's his authority.

So this promise goes forth in the name of God, who cannot lie, goes forth with his power, and has been and is being achieved. So if you are a follower of Jesus, be hopeful, be encouraged, be enthusiastic, and if you're not yet trusting in this Jesus, place all of your cares on him, come to him and come to know this joy, this light, this life, this hope, and come to experience for yourself what it means to be a child of this God, to be a member of this family, to be a follower of this Savior.

And may God bless you this day, and this year, and may all the glory be his. Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would encourage us, strengthen us, and equip us.

[34 : 49] We thank you for these precious promises that are yea and amen in Christ Jesus. We thank you that what you say you mean, what you promise you fulfill, and you delight in using ordinary people like us to demonstrate the extraordinary power, the extraordinary grace, the extraordinary wisdom, the extraordinary love that is found in Jesus Christ.

We thank you that he can carry the whole world on his shoulders, and that his government is increasing day by day, that his kingdom is growing, that men and women and boys and girls throughout this world are coming to know him, and in knowing him are coming to know life abundant and life eternal.

So give us encouragement today, Lord. Give us hope in great measure and help us to be enthusiastic in the gospel, in the service of our Lord, in the encouragement of one another, and in the proclamation of these great and precious promises, the son, the child, the wonderful counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting father, the prince of peace.

We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Now our final item of praise is that magnificent hymn written by Charles Wesley, Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

Let's stand together.