

A great light has dawned

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Date: 25 December 2020

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[0 : 00] The reading is Matthew chapter 4. Now when he had heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death on them, a light has dawned.

From that time, Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Well, put your hand up if you like Christmas.

Whoa, okay. I mean, a hostile audience. Okay. Well, I have to say I don't like Christmas. When it's driven by people who say they love Christmas and say they want to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas, but of course leave Jesus out of it.

Or just give them a token reference of some cute little baby. So it's been a tradition in our household to watch the carol services on TV on the two nights leading up to Christmas.

[1 : 28] Carols in Sydney and the Domain and then the Meyer music bowl. And I tell you, each year I say, that's it, no more. But I come back to them and sort of grind my way through them again.

So I hate Christmas when it presents like that. But I do love celebrating the birth of Jesus. I do love celebrating the birth of Jesus, who is God's wonderful gift to you and to me and to this world in general.

And who wouldn't want to celebrate that when we understand exactly what God has done in Jesus? And so I really love reading and thinking about the records of the life of Jesus, the four Gospels.

We've been working through Matthew's Gospel for the last seven or eight weeks. And I'm just going to pick up the next section, which has fitted really well with our program for Christmas. But girls and boys, before I launch into what I want to say, I've got some photographs to show the girls and boys. Now, I have to tell you, I'm not a real good photographer, so I don't necessarily get the light settings right on the camera first time around. It's great having a digital camera. I can take multiple photographs and eventually maybe I can get one right.

[2 : 46] So girls and boys, I want to put a photograph or two up now and I want you to guess what you're looking at. Ah, it even looks worse on the screen than it did in my camera.

Now, that's my first. Can anybody guess what I've taken a photograph of there? Sorry? My finger. I don't know how to say this to you gently, Nathaniel.

No. Right. Try the next. Try the next. Oh, here we go. I've got a little bit better light now, so that's obviously not a finger, is it, Nathaniel? No. Okay. Any guesses?

A UFO? Ooh. Try again. Well, here we go. A bit of a light beam coming in there and things are getting a little bit more visible. Somebody what?

Somebody's singing on stage. We'll see. Go again, James. Is that going to do it for anybody? Yay!

[3 : 56] Except you're not a child. Just be quiet. So, was that Emma said that? Yeah. Oh, one of the big... All right. Okay. Well, there you go. Okay. One more slide then, James.

Okay. Now, eventually I got it right. And the photograph is... The picture, images of a skateboard. Now, some of the older girls and boys, you might be able to work out why that series of images fits with what you've just heard read from the Bible and what I'm going to speak about now.

We move from dark to being able to see something there. Now, back into the Bible. Beginnings are always important in the Bible.

Especially important in Matthew's biography of Jesus. So, when Matthew begins his biography or his record of life of Jesus, he links us, he begins by linking us right back to the beginning of the nation of Israel.

And God's promise to undo the effects of sin and restores people to the image bearers they were created to be. So, Matthew's writing the story of Jesus, but he takes us back hundreds, thousands of years.

[5 : 11] Then he sets out the details of the supernatural circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus, the beginning of Jesus' life on this earth. And he does that in real detail.

Why? To establish Jesus' credentials. That Jesus is the long-promised Messiah, God's King and Savior. That Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

God himself come into the world in this strange to understand way, but real, God come into the world to deliver God's promised salvation. And in the verses before this morning, Matthew focuses on what Jesus came to do.

So, here we have it. The background, so we can understand Jesus who comes. Then the detail of who Jesus is, his credentials. And now, in these verses, starting to talk about what Jesus has come to do, his mission, his formal ministry.

And if you look at verse 12, we see there that the imprisonment of John the Baptist was, in some shape or form, a signal for Jesus to begin his mission.

[6 : 20] A bit like saying, well, okay, the support act has now left the stage, John the Baptist. Now it's time for the main show to begin.

Another beginning for Matthew. And the details are simple, as Vicki read to them. And they're delivered to us in amazing picture language. So, as we look at these verses, we've got to look for pictures.

And the picture here, at the start of Jesus' ministry, is this. Jesus says, I am the great light. The great light promised by God through the prophets hundreds of years earlier, particularly Isaiah. The great light, the Messiah who would deliver God's renewal of salvation. And the picture from the Old Testament is one of darkness and light.

So, the great light would come and dispel the darkness. What is that darkness? Well, the darkness is a picture of sin and rebellion and being cut off from relationship with God.

[7 : 29] So, Jesus, the great light would come, dispel the darkness, and thereby restore, undo the effects of sin, and restore people to relationship with God, to light and life.

Now, you can see in those verses that Jesus deliberately chose the darkest places to come to. The tribal lands of Zebulun, Naphtali. These were places that in the day would have, if you'd asked people, where is the place that most needs God's salvation?

Where are the people most despicable? They would have said, Galilee, the region of the Jordan. Zebulun, Naphtali. This was an area where God's word had been completely set aside.

Where it looked as if, even though they were covenant lands, covenant tribes, God's word had been set aside. And it looked as if God's covenant promise had completely failed, completely fallen over, been completely lost.

People were totally careless about God's word and totally dismissive of living under God's rule.

[8 : 42] Even other Jews, people in Jerusalem, would have looked at Galilee and seen them as despicably sinful people. And yet it's there that Jesus deliberately chooses to start his ministry.

Isaiah 49, verse 6, is one of the verses that's picked up in this. It's too light a thing, or too little a thing, that you should be my servant to raise up the tribe of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel.

I will make you as a light for the nation. Nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth.

That was spoken about the suffering servant. Remember, history is that God's servant nation, Israel, were supposed to reflect God's character and show God to the whole of the world.

But they failed miserably, absolutely miserably. And so God says, well, okay, I'm going to deliver another type of servant, one servant, a suffering servant, who will do what my servant nation, Israel, failed to do.

Bring light to the nations. Salvation. Salvation. God's character. God is light. In him there can be no darkness. And Malachi 4 is another verse.

[10 : 02] Verse 2. And these are the last verses of the Old Testament. Then there was a sort of 400-year period of silence until we get to Matthew's record. And Malachi says, but for you who fear my name, or the Lord says through Malachi, but for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

And you shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. Messiah would be like the sun of righteousness. Light.

The warming of the sun coming over the horizon, dispelling the darkness of night, giving new hope, new confidence, new cheer, and bringing healing.

It's a wonderful picture. Very profound picture. And so in that context, Jesus was beginning the work of reestablishing his rule.

That's what he's saying here at the beginning of his ministry. Even now, as you look at me, I'm starting to reestablish my rule. And my presence, says Jesus, will be as dramatic as the sunrise.

[11:10] Dispelling the darkness of night. I think Matthew's hinting at something even more dramatic than that. I think he's taking us back to Genesis 1, verses 1 to 3.

Where we have that creation statement of moving from chaos, darkness, emptiness, to light and order.

And God's imprint, God's control. I think Jesus is saying here, look, what I'm about to do is as dramatic as a new creation.

Things are going to start all over again. And my image bears in this new creation will be what they're meant to be. What I created them to be. And verse 17.

This place, this kingdom that Jesus is establishing, is available to anybody. Anybody who recognizes their desperate need.

[12:13] Who recognize they're caught up in darkness and long for light. Anybody who recognizes and prepared to come to Jesus as Savior and King.

The one who would free them from darkness. The one who would bring them into light and life. The one who would bring them into new relationship with God. Symbolized by that light. Now, that's the sort of basic thrust of the text.

But a little bit more personal to us now. If we're not really careful, these pictures of darkness and light will just slip over us. They won't impact us immediately as they would have done people in Jesus' own day.

Why not? Because our world is absolutely full of artificial light. We actually don't really know much about darkness. So I have a question for the girls and boys.

And you can be honest about this one, girls and boys. Because I'm going to be honest in a minute and tell you what it was for me. Any girls and boys here a bit scared in the dark? I was whenever I was in, well, I can remember even at age 14, 15 in Ireland.

[13:29] Having to go out and inspect stock and stuff and keep an eye on shades at night time. And I was terrified of the dark. Now, not very many people put their hands up.

So maybe I've got an unusual demographic in here. Or maybe people are just a little bit nervous. But you know what, girls and boys? It's no big deal to be scared of the dark. You know, lots of adults are scared in the dark.

If I had 10 adults on the, or 11 adults here, 10 adults along the front here. You know, it suggests that at least one, if not two of those adults, would be scared of the dark, even as adults.

Even though they know rationally there's nothing necessarily to be frightened of, darkness still has that fear for us. Now, why has darkness got a fear?

Because it reduces our ability to see. And when we can't see, then we feel out of control. We feel vulnerable. Darkness impairs or nullifies our vision.

[14:30] So it's not so much the darkness itself that we're frightened of. It's what our minds tell us might be in the darkness. So a good classic example of that is if you're out camping, and you should give the child a torch.

They'll shine the torch in front of them, and the torch will light up in front of them. But they'll be terrified because they also want to shine it behind them. Because the darkness sort of closes in around them from behind them.

And so they want to shine it there. And then they have to shine it that way because the darkness, it's what's in the darkness that we fear. Now, I've got something here for the girls and boys.

So girls and boys, if you were in a place of really, really serious darkness, Dave's going to switch off the lights here, and I'm going to try and see how well this will work. Well, it probably won't work very well.

Anyway, we'll see. All right. So, well, it's a bit better. Okay. So I need two or three volunteers really, really quickly. So does anybody want to come up? It doesn't have to be an adult.

[15:31] Yeah, come on. Come on. You want to come up? Yeah. Here we go. Now, I'm going to give you a choice to dispel darkness. So there is a match.

Yeah, okay. So if you're in a really, really dark place, you reckon that would be a good thing to have, to dispel the darkness? You reckon it would? All right. Give her a go.

See what? Don't burn the place down. We are insured, I think. Well, the first thing we have to do to dispel the darkness is get the match to work, don't we? Try another one. Maybe I've given you a double.

All right. While you're trying that, somebody else want to come up? Because I've got something more high-powered here, and it's a tea candle. So I'd say a tea candle's probably going to be annoying.

I'd say a tea candle... I'm good. I'd say that tea candle is probably about...

[16:31] What? What do you reckon? 10, 20 times more efficient than a match in terms of producing light? All right. Nathaniel's a bit of a HSC guy, so I have to respect that. No. So there's that, and there's that, and then I've got my head to it.

All right. The backers and that are pretty crummy at the minute.

Sorry, they're pretty low at the minute. They need replacing. So it's not real bright, but that's pretty bright on a dark night when you've got the head torch on. And then we've got this. Which of those do you reckon you'd like to match or am I with the club like?

Of course, the illustration breaks down because it's hard to get a lead long enough when I'm out camping. I know all that. All right. So when you're working, this sort of thing, at least you've got to commend them for effort.

I really have. It's a rest of my time. So that's a considerable victory, and that can be your task for the rest of my time if you can get a match going. And when you get a match lit, you stand up and wave your hand.

[17:52] Don't melt your sister's dress. But, okay. When we're in a situation of real darkness, we don't really want a match, do we?

And yet, interestingly enough, if you're in a totally dark room, a match will actually seem really, really bright. But we want a really bright light.

Now, here's the point. Even though we might talk about it being really dark, and we do, we sometimes say, oh, it's a really, really dark night. We actually don't know what total darkness is because of artificial light.

So, girls and boys, you've got lights everywhere in your home. You've got lights in your bedroom, lights in the lounge room. You've even got a light in the fridge, for goodness sake. You've got a light in your phone. Assuming everybody's got phones.

And those lights allow us to do the same things at night as what we do in the daytime. We have powerful floodlights in sports arenas and in workplaces.

[18:58] That allows us to work and play at nighttime like we would during the daytime. We've got headlights on our cars. That allows us to travel at the same speed at nighttime in a car as what we would travel in the daytime, in daylight, sunlight.

We get streetlights. So, if we want to, we can go out for a walk at night. Almost as clear as it is during the daytime. So, the point is that we rarely, in our world, if ever, experience total darkness. But, we don't have total darkness because if you go into a dark night here, your eyes become accustomed to it. And because your eyes become accustomed to the darkness, that tells you there's still light. Now, I've actually been in a situation, two situations, where there's been total darkness.

And I felt the fear rising within me. One was when I go caving. So, when you're in a cave, way down below the earth, there's just no light. Your eyes don't get accustomed.

You can be there for hours, days, and your eyes don't get accustomed. There's zero light. And that means, you can actually put your finger in front of your nose, and you can't see it.

[20:07] I was also down on mine. Alice and I went down on mine in Broken Hill once. And the guide told us to turn off our torches. After telling us to look where we were, we're in a passageway, a lead, and he said, look where you are.

It was a narrow thing, so we're standing facing the wall, which was a meter or so in front of us that way. And then the lead went off for meters and meters, hundreds of meters either side of us. Turn off your lights, and just stand.

You know, within about 30 seconds, I didn't actually know which way I was facing, let alone know how to find my way out of the darkness. My brain was so befuddled with the darkness that I totally lost orientation.

And I could feel the fear rising within me, even though I knew the guide was there, because he was still talking, and he was going to tell us to turn our head torches on in a few seconds again.

The darkness was suffocating. It was fear causing. Now, in the past, people were terrified of nighttime because of the darkness.

[21 : 16] They didn't have artificial light. They weren't able to see, therefore they weren't able to control the world. They were at a greater risk of being attacked by wild animals or by enemies. Darkness was considered to be the domain of evil and devils.

And in that context, people longed to see the dawning of the new day. And they would feel the relief flooding through them because they'd survived the darkness and once again come into the light.

Darkness, and we're almost finished, darkness is something that every person in our world experiences in some way. You might be a person this morning who's simply lost in darkness as you think about your world and your life and its meaning and purpose.

That is, when I say lost, if somebody asked you, how did you get there? You'd say, well, actually, I don't know. I don't know, but I know, I sense that that's where I'm at.

And I don't know how to get out of it. That's like being in that mine shaft. Now, against that, some people find they love the darkness.

[22 : 42] The Bible talks about that. Some people love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil. And you only have to walk down the street of Newcastle after the hours of midnight and you see and experience that.

You listen to the news. It's at nighttime when so much crime happens, when so many assaults happen, so much sexual abuse and stuff happen. People love the cover of darkness because it actually does that.

It actually reduces people's vision. And they think that they can get away with things at nighttime. The party set is classic for that.

And yet, people wake up the next morning feeling really, really unsatisfied. Perhaps even cheapened by their actions in the darkness. Or diminished, feeling diminished because of the actions of somebody else towards them in the darkness.

So some are simply lost in darkness. Some love the darkness. But there's a third category, maybe more. I could only think of three.

[23 : 45] Some hide in the shadows of darkness is the way I'm going to put it. And what am I talking about there? Well, I think there's a lot of people who are full of shame.

And again, they're full of shame either because of their own actions that they now say were just terrible or thoughtless or they're full of shame because of the actions of other people on them.

And so, they would love to be able just to have the confidence to step out in the light as it were and be somebody who's appreciated and loved and know that people are going to do that.

But so often, they hide in the shadows because they're full of shame and they don't know what to do with that shame except to hide. whatever your situation, whatever your connection to darkness, you're closed out from relationship to God who is light and life.

And the brilliant news of Christmas is that God is offering you a great gift of life and light. John chapter 8, verse 12.

[24 : 57] Jesus speaking. Then Jesus spoke again to them saying, I am the light of the world. He that follows me shall not walk in darkness.

There in picture language is God's gift to you this morning at Christmas in the birth of Jesus. a light source who will totally dispel darkness.

Not just a match, but a 500 watt floodlight. Not just going to push the darkness back a little bit, but one who dispels darkness completely.

You can't have light and dark in the same space. And Jesus floods your life, promises to flood your life with light and life in a way that dispels all darkness.

And when you think about light, and I'll finish on these thoughts, light is actually able to heal. So little babies with jaundice are put under, I think it's a UV light, a purple light or something like that.

[26 : 07] I don't know why they still are, but that's what happened whenever our kids were little. And that light, I have no idea how, but somehow it breaks down whatever the jaundice is and heals.

our body absorbs various vitamins and stuff through, from sunlight and light.

Light is able to heal your body. Jesus is the promised son of righteousness who heals and renews you from the inside out. Light is able to warm and nourish.

I've been camping in some really cold times, like really cold. and there's nothing nicer than after a long, dark, cold night to feel that sun come up over the horizon and immediately, immediately, you can just feel it starting to warm you to the depths of your soul.

And that's what Jesus does. He warms and nourishes your soul to delight in the Lord God. And light, of course, illuminates.

It increases your vision, enables us to see the way, shines into the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds, both exposing darkness wherever it lurks and dispelling it with his light.

[27 : 28] The verse 17, the appropriate response on Christmas morning is to move towards the light, to move towards Jesus. the word in verse 17 is repent.

That's what the word means. Stop going that way. Stop being in the darkness and move towards the light of Jesus, the light of life. Stop living in fear and darkness.

Stop living cut off from relationship with God. Come to Jesus. The Greek philosopher Plato once said, we can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark.

the real tragedy of life is when people are afraid of the light. Wouldn't that be a strange thing if though we have a fear of darkness, our fear of the light actually kept us coming, kept us from coming to Jesus.

That would be a tragedy, wouldn't it? Do you want to celebrate Christmas truly? Well, don't be satisfied with the fairy lights on your Christmas tree.

[28 : 40] And they're nice, no question about it. Don't be satisfied with fairy lights on your Christmas tree. Come to Jesus, the true light. He'll recreate you. He'll renew you.

He'll heal you. He'll dispel darkness from every corner of your heart and mind. He'll give you such a rich, satisfying, delightful light and life so that you can enjoy the good life you long for and which God created you to enjoy.

Thank you very much for listening to me on this Christmas morning. Enjoy your day. Happy Christmas.