**3rd Sunday OT Cycle A January 22, 2023**

Isaiah 8:23-9:3 Psalm 27 1 Cor 1:10-13, 17 Matthew 4: 12-23

Unless we can contain ourselves in a bubble, or in a clam shell at the bottom of the ocean, we too live in the land of Zebulon and Naphtali.

Zebulon and Naphtali were two tribes of Israel named after and identified in the Book of Genesis as a couple of Jacob’s twelve sons. These were also lands among two of the areas apportioned, or carved out, for the Twelve Tribes of Israel when they settled the Promised Land. This region was located on the northern end of Israel, bordering the west shore of the Sea of Galilee and the west bank of the Jordan River. The region of Galilee became a land of darkness overshadowed by death because the people were among the ten tribes who gave up their faith in God and turned to worldliness and sinfulness. Invading nations from the north, like the Assyrian Empire, would annex this territory first before driving further south in their conquests. Much like the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, war crimes are common. The land is plundered, people massacred, women raped, others enslaved, children separated from families and many unthinkable atrocities. But to some degree, don’t these things occur in our own nation and under our own noses?

Opposing the darkness and shadows of death, Isaiah prophesied a message of hope to God’s people, “the people in darkness have seen a great light….light has arisen.” Although Galilee still maintained a large population of Jews, the majority of the population were gentiles. Gentiles wielded their worldly influence on the faithful Jews then, much like our secular culture degrades Christian values today. After Isaiah made his prophecy, Zebulon and Naphtali were bullied around for 700 years before the time of Jesus. Jesus remains faithful to his Church and even now as it was 2000 years ago, He is our light in this darkness. Truly there can be no greater light than Christ.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus changes his postal code, withdraws from his off the beaten path Nazareth home of 30 years, and went to live in the more cosmopolitan crossroads town of Capernaum, near the Sea of Galilee in the region of Zebulon and Naphtali. Capernaum is where Jesus would encounter a greater number of needy persons than in Nazareth where everybody knew each other by first name. Now into the gloom steps someone whose face radiates hope, whose words penetrate to the heart. To the people who live in the hellish kingdom of Herod, he announces that the heavenly kingdom is at hand. He walks the lake shore alone. But his mission is not to remain alone. He has come to call people out of the darkness into the light. Jesus first calls four fishermen, Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John to help him in his new start-up Church ministry. They immediately left their boats and followed Jesus. They recognized he is ‘the light that has arisen that will bring abundant joy and great rejoicing’ to a people of this darkened region that had been overshadowed by death. Most likely, this was not the first time though these first Apostles had met Jesus. They probably heard John the Baptist call him the Lamb of God and had been at the wedding feast at Cana when Jesus miraculously changed the water into wine. While the folks in the region of Zebulon and Naphtali had to wait 700 years for the light of Jesus to come, He is with us now in His Church for almost 2000 years now.

What does the word “Church” really mean? The Greek word for church is “*ek-klesia*”; in Greek it means those who are “called out.” By virtue of our baptism in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are all called out to carry the light of Christ where there is darkness. We don’t withdraw from family and friends, move to the mountains, and wait for the second coming. We are called out. Right where we are. Where we live, where we work, in our families and friendships, and all the circles of people we encounter on a daily basis. **To be a Christian means to belong to a group of people who leave behind a community of darkness with its tired way of life, to join another community dedicated to a new, fresh way of living and an entirely different vision.**  **To respond to Christ’s call to the Church means to be in the world but not of it.** Not to be manipulated by the media. Not to be motivated by the love of money, pleasure, and power. It means to “re-form your life.” To allow your thinking and your pattern of life to be completely reorganized around the truth of God’s word.

The dark side is indeed at work in our nation, inventing creative ways to subvert Supreme Court rulings and normalize an immoral agenda without any regard for emotional, physical or spiritual health. Recently, the Mayor of New York City announced a program to hand out free abortion pills like candy or trinkets thrown out to revelers at a Mardi Gras parade. But do not lose heart brothers and sisters. This past Tuesday I was at the State Capitol for the inauguration of John Kane, the Chief State Supreme Court Justice. He told me he added the phrase “so help me God” when he took his oath of office. What his simple statement tells us, that through his Catholic faith, the honorable Chief Justice, John Kane is a light in the darkness at a high level in our state government. It serves as a reminder that if we all do our part, the light of Christ will shine through the darkness.

Here at St. Bernard Parish we don’t have to look any further than the commons or our Sunday bulletin to find ways to be light of Christ through faith enrichment and volunteer charity opportunities. Small faith groups and larger communities like ACTS serve to shine the light of Christ in our parish. Catholic Charities represents a diocesan effort bringing light in darkness and hope to many people in Eastern Oklahoma, most of whom are not Catholic. Worldwide, there are many Catholic organizations and missionary groups proclaiming the Gospel and bringing Christ’s light to some of the darkest corners on Earth. The Church is able to do so much good in the world because of its oneness and knowing that Christ was indeed crucified for all of us. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul tells us to not be divided that we should be united in the same mind and in the same purpose. Being ‘One’ is the first mark of the Church which we recite in our creed.

As we come forward to receive Jesus in the Eucharist, let us remind ourselves that we are consuming the light that has arisen and called out of our darkness to continue the mission to be Christ’s light for the world.