

I was out a couple afternoons last week and noticed that the days are noticeably longer. Yet where I live, even when it is dark, it's never *really* dark. I have two dawn to dusk lampposts, most of my neighbors have outdoor lighting, and even though the neighborhood backs up against the woods, there is always a soft glow of light pollution beyond the hill, I presume from the East Freedom interchange. But Connie reminded me that three years ago this week a group of us were in the Holy Land, including this region described in today's scripture as a "land of deep darkness." One clear memory of that trip was a nighttime drive through the undeveloped wilderness of Jordan to Petra—the place where Indiana Jones found the Holy Grail—where I thought I had never been somewhere so dark. Since the invention of electricity, we've lost the depth of what scripture tries to convey through the oft-repeated metaphor of darkness and light.

Isaiah would have known that deep darkness when he describes the hope of restoration as a great light. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the tribes of Israel that settled in the north of the Promised Land. When Isaiah talks about them living in deep darkness, he's referring to the desperation of the Assyrian invasion. Light shines on them when their oppressor, Assyria, is defeated and they are restored to freedom in their land.

But Israel never maintained their autonomy for long, and by Jesus' day, they were occupied yet again, this time by Rome. When Matthew repeats Isaiah's prophecy and calls the place "Galilee of the Gentiles" he doesn't mean that there aren't practicing Jews there but that they are oppressed by foreign occupation. Roman rule made it a "region of shadow and death". And John had just announced to his disciples and anyone else who would listen that the whole purpose of his ministry was to point the way to Jesus; then King Herod arrested him. So Jesus flees the hotter spots of political turmoil to begin his ministry in the still occupied but relatively safer region of Galilee.

John's arrest itself was a good example of the oppression under which the people suffered. John had criticized Herod, whom Israel did not consider a legitimate king, but who was Rome's puppet ruler. The empire kept the peace by silencing dissenters, so Herod imprisons and eventually kills John to protect his power. That's the kind of danger in which they all lived. But for most of Israel, the dark days of Roman occupation didn't result in imprisonment and beheading but economic exploitation. Historians think as many as 90% of the people either lived right at the edge of survival, or fell over the edge into starvation and all the debilitating health problems caused by exposure and malnourishment—possibly the same diseases and sicknesses Jesus cured.

The fishermen Jesus encountered along the Sea of Galilee would have been part of that economy where Rome profited at the workers' expense—not by their choice, of course, but because they had no other options to survive. For the right to fish in colonized waters, sell their catch in colonized markets, and take their wages home to colonized towns, they would have been taxed,

steeply, enough that they were unlikely to ever experience life beyond poverty. This is the darkness and shadow of death that Matthew describes: a desperate life, with no hope of respite; always one accident, illness, storm, or drought away from ruin and death.

We don't know why Peter, Andrew, James, and John were so eager to walk away from their nets and their boats, even from their father. Maybe they never wanted to be fishermen. Maybe Zebedee was a bear to work for and they couldn't wait to get away from him. Maybe they had always wanted to pursue the religious life and Jesus was the first rabbi willing to take them on. But whatever their motivation, they were walking away from their part in a system that was meant to keep them and many others locked in a hopeless struggle to merely survive—a mean existence nothing like the abundant, thriving life intended by the God who led Israel into that land, flowing with milk and honey.

I always used to read Jesus' invitation, "I'll make you fish for people" as a kind of metaphor for the disciples "catching souls for Jesus"...but I don't know why, because that's not at all a good description of what the disciples ended up doing. Instead, what if Jesus was contrasting their old way of life—fishing for the profit of their Roman overlords—with a new way of looking at life: fishing, or doing whatever it is that we do for a living, with the benefit of our own health and our families and community in mind. What if they could fish for the reason God gave us fish, so that hungry people could eat, not so they could afford to pay Rome for the privilege of...working and paying more to Rome? As soon as Jesus invited them to step out of that never ending cycle, they immediately walked away, following Jesus to something—anything—that promised new life.

At the beginning of this passage, Matthew foreshadowed what happens to those who disrupt evil in the world: John was imprisoned by a system designed to keep the powerful in control, that would resort to violence if necessary. So we should not be surprised when Jesus is eventually executed, after he disrupted the way the people viewed their government, religion, economy, and traditions. But God came anyway, because we *need* light to disrupt this life that is sometimes made really dark by things beyond our control—illness, natural disasters, death—but that is also made really dark by some things that *are* within our human capability to improve, but that we just don't—hunger, violence, poverty, environmental destruction, the inhumane treatment of other people.

The disciples didn't just drop their nets; they dropped a way of life that was meant to keep them—and so many others—in darkness and despair. Jesus invited them to live in a way that more nearly reflected the kingdom of heaven, reflecting God's light and love, amongst themselves but also for the good of others. And so we are invited to ask ourselves: what is keeping us in the dark that, were we to drop it, would bring us and others hope and light? How might we live that the kingdom of heaven comes a little nearer? May Christ light the way and give us the will and strength to follow it.