

## *“Together Toward the Light (Jan 22, ‘17”*

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*“Land of Zebulon, land of Naphtali along the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light; for those who sat - shaded by death - a light has dawned.”*

The Gospel of Matthew is echoing the message of the prophet Isaiah... making a present reality out of hopes for the future held by the ancestors of those to whom he is writing the story of Jesus.

While not their ‘biological’ descendents, we are spiritual heirs of the same hopes.



*“Land of Lakes, headwaters of the St. Lawrence, the people who lived in darkness have seen a great light, on those who lived in a community shaded by death a light has dawned.*

More often than any of the other Gospels, Matthew uses Hebrew Scripture passages to accent Jesus’s connection with their past as he writes to the Jewish followers of Christus, in Hebrew: Messiah, in English: the Anointed... “anointed” by God to save his people.

There’s a wide range of interpretations as to what it means, ‘To be saved by Jesus,’ but there’s a general agreement within Christianity that he was anointed by God for that mission.

Chosen and sent - one popular interpretation - commissioned to reconcile humanity with God.

And, added to that, is another interpretation that allows me to paraphrase Matthew’s text: It happened not only two-thousand years ago, but it is an ongoing effort in the Spirit of Christ.

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As with the children earlier this morning, lights go on for us too.... Because that is what God wants for us!

PAUSE

The book of Isaiah covers three historical eras:

1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah prophesied from around 750 - 700BCE.

Assyria had occupied Israel’s Northern Kingdom, and Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was in danger.

2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, one of his disciples, prophesied to people from the southern kingdom of Judah, during the 50 year long exile in Babylon... in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Assyria had fallen to Babylon, as had Judah, with the aristocracy taken into exile by them; That’s the era from which today’s text comes.

3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah covers an even later Jewish era.

Matthew knows the 'up and down' story of his people,  
and we're quite certain he wrote to a Jewish audience.

To remind them of God's faithfulness in the past,  
would help Matthew to connect them with Jesus -  
the Messiah, the Anointed one who will save them.

And what's Jesus' message?  
What John the Baptist taught  
became Jesus' message also:

*"Repent! For the kingdom  
of heaven has come near."*

(Instead of "has come near"  
The K. J. has, "is at hand.")



Rethink, reformulate, reorganize, repattern, reframe,  
however we translate the Greek, what was intended  
was a "re-evaluation" of their relationship with God.

I don't think this was a put-down of the past,  
but rather a wake-up call to take a good look  
at how faithful they were - or were not - being  
as people in a covenant relationship with God.

And whatever we may believe, or  
however we formulate that belief,  
and I prefer the K. J. English here,  
it's what we do that matters... for,  
*"The kingdom is at hand."*

At the ends of our arms, at hand, at our fingertips,  
what we do about what we believe is what matters.

This year we'll celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> yr. of Confederation  
part of which will be taking time to remember our past.

A summary of what happened in those 150 years  
from erection of the Limestone Church buildings,  
then Union, forming the United Church of Canada,  
legitimized by an Act of Parliament, June 10, 1925.

In the 60's, UCW was formed, joining WMS & WA,  
we got a new curriculum and welcomed the EUB:  
prompting a "renaming" for some congregations.

CE wings were added; the Church was booming,  
with, literally, hundreds of infants, children, teens  
and young, middlers & mature adults participating.

As Matthew did for his readers... you have kept  
an awareness of God's call & God's faithfulness  
to this church alive... telling & retelling its story.

And today with the Spire Project and initiatives  
with Chalmers, you're open to new possibilities.

But it's not been all sunshine & roses, peaches and cream.  
Like Stephen Leacock chastising Nelly McClung a cy. ago,  
*"Women don't belong in voting booths?"*

That repentance didn't come without a struggle.

And it would be another 1/2 century before women  
could be both married AND ordained as Ministers  
in the UCC; now we're marrying same sex couples.

...several more hard-won repentances.

Matthew recognizes the situation in 30CE Israel -  
and Jesus entry into it - as a similar kind of Exile,  
one from which God, in Jesus, is extricating them.

Enough of you were adults in the 60s, as I was,  
who can remember the curriculum controversy.  
Teaching children Literary Criticism of the Bible  
was - and is still by many - considered a Heresy.  
That - and several other more recent epiphanies -  
are repentances we can say are “still in progress.”

I believe we are at another “crossroads” in our history,  
and Matthew’s Jesus is calling us to another Epiphany.  
I hinted at it last wk; we need to revisit our foundations.

Our UC Observer reports the numbers regularly:  
attendance is less than ½ what it was 30 yrs. ago.  
It is something that all churches have in common  
But we also share Jesus’ message of hope.

This past week was the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity,  
But be careful, let us not confuse “unity” with “uniformity.”

We are one in the Spirit of Christ, God in the Flesh;  
and, more & more, that embraces all people of faith;  
but we are not monolithic - we are not all the same -  
ie., sculptures hacked from a single piece of granite

We are all different, each with unique DNA.  
Yet, we also have some things in common;  
we are all in need of a light to lead the way.  
and a worth-wile task to occupy our hands.  
Aah, yes! The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Lynn Hutchinson and I are working with Chalmers  
to prepare an education piece on Lay Pastoral Care.  
I’m taking a week of Study Leave to frame an outline.

We’ll be meeting twice, about a month apart:  
i.e., Friday evening, 7-9, Saturday, 9-12 & 1-4.  
Really listening to personal, spiritual issues  
is central... how to be Christ to one another.

You are doing some of that in your regional groups.  
Susan and I have attended some of those pot-lucks.  
but there’s a “realization” that we need to go deeper.

We not only need to initiate that work here today,  
but provide “ongoing” pastoral care into the city.

I believe Matthew’s Jesus gave us a practical hint  
in how that might best be done in any generation,  
when he called out the first four disciples in pairs:

They had been brothers in trade (not biological)  
and they became brothers in the service of God.  
In today’s language we’d call them companions.

No-one needs to feel left out in the dark! People of faith,  
we are not alone; and - paraphrasing Matthew’s citation -  
we can walk toward that Light together... hand in hand.

*“Land of Lakes - headwaters of the St. Lawrence - the  
people who lived in darkness have seen a great light.”*

Will this initiative be anywhere near as momentous  
as the beginning of Jesus’ ministry 2000 years ago?  
Who knows? But it is “at hand” here and now, Amen.