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Isaiah 9:1-2, English Standard Version

9 But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.

Matthew 4:12-17, English Standard Version

12 Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.
13 And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, **14** so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

15 “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
16 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.”

17 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

From Nazareth to the Internet.

We talked about Isaiah last week. In it, the prophet Isaiah delivers a message of social justice, faith in God, rewards for those who follow God, and judgment for those who do not. We also mentioned that Isaiah was very popular with early Christians. One reason is that the Gospel of Matthew repeatedly references Isaiah, and so gentile (non-Jewish) Gospel readers learned about Isaiah through the story of Jesus. As an example, in today's first passage our prophet has just switched from proclaiming judgment to proclaiming the promise of God's graces, saying that God's people will be rescued. Then, in our second quote, Matthew directly references this passage from Isaiah, clearly stating that Jesus came to Earth to fulfill this Old Testament prophesy from Isaiah, in particular that Jesus caused "the people dwelling in darkness" to "have seen a great light." The passage of Matthew then says: "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" In the first century, this phrase made converts to Christianity think of that restoration of Israel that the prophets, including Isaiah, made Jews believe would happen. It inspired faith in Jesus.

Note that these two passages are talking about the same geographic area. Verse 1 of the Isaiah quote references Zebulun and Naphtali. These are two areas

in the northern part of the land of the Israelites, and it became known as the Galilee. This larger region is referenced in the passage from Matthew.

Let's look closely at our second passage, from Matthew. John the Baptist has just been taken prisoner. Jesus decides to go from Nazareth, his hometown, to Capernaum, which is on the edge of the Sea of Galilee. The actual wording is that Jesus "withdrew" to Capernaum. Some translations say "retired" to Capernaum. There is one that says that he "departed" to Capernaum. Withdrew is actually an accurate translation, and what's interesting is that this one word has caused people to misunderstand this passage. It makes it sound like the Romans arrested John the Baptist, and so Jesus decided to leave the chaotic, dangerous world of Nazareth and go hide out in a quiet little town on the Sea.

But it's just the opposite. Remember that the passage from Isaiah refers to "the way of the sea", which is a heavily traveled route between Damascus and the Mediterranean Sea. The point is that Nazareth was in the middle of nowhere, far from the major roads that ran between the Holy Land and Egypt to the south, and the ancient, great conqueror Assyria to the north. Jesus didn't seek seclusion when he went to the Galilee: he deliberately moved to a place that was near major roads. And this passage from Matthew reminded readers of the Gospel of the violent history of the area. In 733 B.C., the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-pileser III launched a two-

year-long invasion of Israel. He conquered the northern portion of the country, including the Galilee and what later became Capernaum. Much later, Assyria went on to conquer the rest of Israel. But sadly, the Galilee was closer to Assyria and was on a strategic road connecting Israel to empires in the north and the south.

The point is that Isaiah and Matthew are referring to the same piece of geography, and it was no laid-back remote area. It was on a very major trade route that the Assyrians wanted to control; it's what led to them to invade Israel. But Nazareth was off to the west, on the other side of some hills. Nazareth was thus a safer place. It was the more remote area. Jesus left Nazareth and "withdrew" to Capernaum not to hide out, but because he wanted to be in a more international area. This was both a good and a bad thing. It was bad because this area was vulnerable to invasion. But it was good because the population there was far more diverse. It was a wealthier community, full of people who carried on international trade. It was a place where Jesus' message was more likely to be accepted. These people were already exposed to very diverse ways of thinking. So, this is where Jesus went to fulfill the prophesy of bringing light to people who were in darkness.

But what about the fulfillment of the ancient prophesy through the ministry of Jesus? Matthew tells us that Jesus did cause the kingdom of Israel to be reborn – but of course, as we have come to realize, God's new realm is not an earthly one,

but rather a spiritual one. Matthew frequently quotes Isaiah when he speaks of Jesus' ministry to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Through Jesus' ministry in the Galilee, in the area around Capernaum, Matthew sees something far greater than the promise of the restoration of the nation of Israel. Jesus placed himself on the international trade road, a place that was both dangerous and full of those who would later spread the word of God's new empire far and wide as they traveled.

But some say that Matthew, being aware of the importance of the Book of Isaiah, made up this claim about Jesus going to the Galilee, as we just read about in his Gospel, so that he could refer to the Old Testament prophecies. There is a controversial issue that has been greatly discussed by scholars and people who study the Bible. Was Jesus literally fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament, or was the author of the Gospel leveraging the Old Testament as a way of giving weight to Jesus' preaching? In other words, was Matthew manipulating the story of Jesus by artificially making it seem like he was fulfilling ancient prophecies? Matthew does seem hell bent on making Jesus appear to be the fulfiller of God's promises to the Jews. Maybe it was a way of giving extra power to the story of Jesus. This goes hand-in-hand with the argument that the miracles never happened, that these were invented by the Gospel writers, again, to give more weight to the Jesus story. Many have claimed this.

I don't personally believe that every part of the Bible is literally true. I think that the story of creation, with the garden of Eden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is an obvious allegory, and we will talk about this at some point in the future. I am not so sure that there was a great flood that actually covered the entire earth. In general, it's the early stuff in the Old Testament that is most likely to have been manipulated by many writers over many hundreds of years, with the material being massaged, pulled apart, put back together in different forms, and rewritten repeatedly. There is bound to be material in there that is not literally true. And indeed, there is strong evidence that much of the older material in the Old Testament has been worked on by countless writers and editors.

But I do believe that the story of Jesus is true. I believe that Jesus went from Nazareth to Capernaum after John the Baptist was arrested. I believe that Jesus deliberately went there so that his message would spread quickly. I believe he also went there in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. I also believe in the miracles in the New Testament.

However, there is something more important than this to me. The Bible – all of it, Old and New – touches me deeply. I want to suggest that you try something – and I'm going to ask you to really give it a shot. This week, in fact, each day this

week, open the Bible. Make it either the Psalms or the New Testament. Let's not use the Book of Revelation. Or if you want to go easy on yourself, consider just the Psalms, the four Gospels, and Acts. Open these parts of the Bible to a random place. Find a passage. It might be just a verse. You might have to backtrack to the beginning of a story or a concept. You might have to read forward a bit. But find some small chunk of the Bible, maybe a handful of verses and really read them. See if they touch you. I believe that God talks to us through Scripture. I believe that we're guided toward verses that are meant for us.

When I was a boy, we weren't encouraged to read the Bible. The priests interpreted it for us, and pretty much the only Bible a family would have in the house was the one that recorded births and deaths. My parents had one of those, but they never even bothered to fill in those front pages with names and dates. It wasn't until years later when I started attending Protestant churches that I was truly exposed to the Bible. By the way, I understand that Catholics read the Bible today. But rediscovering the Bible rejuvenated my faith. Read the Bible, starting out with just bits and pieces. I've been trying over the last year to expose everyone here to the Bible, to maybe get people excited about actually reading it. And, oh – tomorrow is the anniversary of my arrival at Pierce!

The Bible is the story of God's promises to humanity, and the story of Jesus, and of the church that followed in his footsteps as people moved outward from the Holy Land. In fact, there's something empowering about studying the Bible today. When I was a boy, information was controlled, it was the property of special people. The priests held the Bible as their property. And legal, medical, social, scientific, engineering, political – knowledge of all kinds was difficult to dig up. With the Internet, today, though, we can get our hands on almost anything. I have a vast library of Christian, Jewish, Greek, Hebrew, historical, and scriptural literature that I can access on my phone. If I had to buy it on paper, it would cost many thousands of dollars, fill my home with volumes, and take decades to hunt down. Because it's available digitally and I was able to simply download it over the Internet, my library literally takes up zero space, and it was relatively cheap and easy to assemble. For me, though, the starting place for all things having to do with spirituality, with faith, is the Bible. Everything fingers out from there. So, if you haven't been in the practice of looking at the Bible, I'm hoping that I've been able to spark your interest in our scriptural heritage. It might lead you to search through an infinite amount of material on the Internet, and I would be very happy to help you in this journey.

Jesus brought the Word of God to the world by walking from Nazareth to the Galilee. He brought the Old Testament world into the context of the new world.

Technology has spread the Word to the most remote places. Just search for the word “Bible” on the app store or the software store on your phone, if you’d like a free, convenient version of the Bible to carry around. Search for apps under “daily bible verse”, and you can download multiple free apps that will pop a Bible verse on your phone once a day. Give it a try. I’m sure you could find a twelve-year-old to help you. Once you get started, you might be very surprised how much you can learn, and how it will fill your heart with hope and joy. When you’re feeling lonely, or worried about your health or the health of a loved one, when you’re feeling like you’ve failed at something. When you’re worried about money or your future, try letting God speak to you through the Bible – Let God deliver a verse that is meant just for you. Do it. Amen.