

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
St. Matthew 4:12-25; Isaiah 9:1-4

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

His was a life seemingly filled with setbacks and continual difficulty. And it all started while He was still in the womb.

Mary was with child by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, who was pledged to be her husband, was filled with doubt and confusion. "She's pregnant, but I didn't do it. What will the people think if I take her to be my wife while she's pregnant? Or, better yet, what will they think if we get married and the baby is already here?" So, he sought to divorce her quietly. How could he take Mary and the baby to be his own?

Next, after Jesus had been born, and while He was still an infant, there was a call for his life. Herod demanded the lives of all newborn males in order to keep his power on the throne. So, off to Egypt does this trio venture, Joseph having overcome his doubt and confusion by a vision from God. "[O]ut of Egypt I called My son," (Hosea 11:1) the prophet declared. Word fulfilled.

But it didn't stop there. What happened immediately after Jesus was baptized? He was led off into the wilderness by the Spirit, and, having fasted for 40 days, He was tempted by Satan. The adversary offered Him all kinds of riches and treasures and power if He would only have renounced His mission, renounced His Father, and worshiped Satan. "You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve," (cf. Deuteronomy 6:13) the Word declares. Satan left Him, and Jesus was still true to His mission and His Father. Word fulfilled.

Maybe the temptation served as a distraction. During the time He was in the wilderness fasting and being tempted, powers had seized His cousin. John had just baptized Jesus, then he was thrown in prison. Setbacks and difficulty—one upon another—followed this man, Jesus. And not all of them were to Him, but He certainly could have been blamed for them. He did not have an easy life; but such was His lot in life, for it is as the prophets declared, and so the Word is fulfilled.

Trouble seemed to follow Him wherever He went. Some other man might have secluded Himself—become a recluse—removed Himself in order to keep his troubles away from those he loved; probably might have attempted to run away from those problems himself. Then, a glance at the text this morning may surprise you, for it looks like He did just that: "And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali..." He withdrew to the north, far away from the Jews, far away from His home of Nazareth, far away from Jerusalem and the temple, and made a home in Capernaum, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

But, just what is it about Zebulun and Naphtali? You likely recognize those as names of two of the tribes of Israel. These are the northern-most regions of Israel. It was choice land—beautiful landscapes, fertile soil, nice climate, the Sea of Galilee was right there—this area had a lot going for it. That was, of course, until the split. The ten northern tribes divorced themselves from the two southern tribes, and there were two kingdoms. Unfortunately for the northern kingdom, their neighbors were growing in political and military power. Assyria would come and conquer the northern kingdom, beginning in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali. They were living in the land of the shadow of death!

These two tribes, along with the eight other northern tribes, were taken into captivity, becoming the ten lost tribes of Israel. Other people were placed there by the captors to populate the northern lands, almost all of mixed descent. These mixed breeds, descendants of Assyrian captives, would become moral enemies of the Jews: Samaritans. Some might have had some Hebrew ancestry, but even they wouldn't know from which tribe they were descended, so they would all be outsiders—not the Chosen People—Gentiles—even worse than Gentiles. So, it became a region rightly hailed by

the prophet as “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Interestingly, some Jews did live in Galilee; it was, after all, a part of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus, so much so that it was known as a Jewish fishing village in the time of Jesus. Nevertheless, it was in the land of the Samaritan Gentiles, probably populated by a pretty diverse and somewhat tolerant population.

That is where Jesus went. But did He withdraw? No, in fact, He fulfilled the Word of God (as St. Matthew repeatedly reminds you); this time, as proclaimed by Isaiah: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the 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.” And despite all His setbacks and difficulty, Jesus pressed on, preaching His cousin’s message in that area, a light shining on the people living in darkness, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

And the people listened and followed! He was out expanding His kingdom, finding His people wherever they were to be found. Matthew wrote of four, specifically, that He found: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. He was out preaching repentance, teaching in synagogues, healing diseases, and restoring broken bodies as he traveled from town to town. He was shining His light on Jews and Gentiles—a light of revelation to the Gentiles—the light of faith; they believed and followed.

His means seem inefficient. After all, if He was God, He could have waved His arms and made believers out of the entire region, indeed, of the entire world. But, as Naaman the leper discovered, God works by a simple means: His Word. (cf. 2 Kings 5) With His Word, He created the universe, and with His Word, He creates faith and eternal life in all who would believe.

Jesus was in the land of darkness bringing light. He was present among the people of the nations telling them that they are not forgotten. He was in the land of the shadow of death to bring light and life, not as a conqueror or mighty, earthly king, but as a gracious, soft-spoken king. He was easily missed, but He preached repentance. Truly, this land has been the stomping grounds for blood-thirsty conquerors, and it will be again when the Romans armies come through once more 40 years later, but at that moment, the King of Life was among them, creating faith in all who would listen to His Word and giving them eternal life.

I could go on and on about life in the shadow of death in Zebulun and Naphtali. Those who wished to sack Jerusalem found easy access through the north—through this region. But the reality of mortality that you experience is no less real than what the Zebulunites and Naphtalites knew. Everyone, here in the United States and around the rest of the world, also live in the land of the shadow of death. The threats to your lives are very real: floods, icy roads, freak accidents, terrorists, murderers, deranged gunmen, heart attacks, cancer, drunk drivers...the list goes on and on.

Even in this modern, more-civilized and evolved society, death continues to strike. Yet, all too often, it is forcefully ignored or cheerfully embraced.

Tragedies and atrocities are horrible, horrible things. People are interested in what’s going on from a pity stand point and because it’s hard to take one’s eyes away from a trainwreck, but you can only endure so much heartache before you become desirous for what’s positive. That’s when you look away; that’s when you want to ignore the pain and suffering and death of the world around you. Because maybe if you ignore the reality of the situation—that people have died—death doesn’t seem so imminent. So, death becomes easily ignored, but that doesn’t mean that death doesn’t exist and is coming after you, too.

Still, ironically, death is also an ally. Death by floods or terrorists is a horrible thing—so society acknowledges—but society has also befriended death. Even though the decision was overturned recently, January 22, 1973, 53 years ago, marked a turning point in which death was embraced as a means of improving quality of life as the Supreme Court issued an opinion that essentially legalized

abortion. Since then, so many lives have been lost to the holocaust of abortion and continue to be so as it is still viewed and hailed as “healthcare.” And, as the indifference to the helpless life in the womb increases, so does indifference to the helpless life outside the womb as more and more places legalize or turn a blind eye toward assisted suicide and even euthanasia.

Welcome to Zebulun and Naphtali. You are in the land of the shadow of death.

Death is always looming, knocking at your doors. You see and read the reports of tragedies and atrocities such as the floods and earthquakes, shootings at schools, accidents on the highways, and everything else that happens tens or hundreds or thousands of miles from here and you feel pity: “poor them.” But then the shadow of death makes its appearance in your own lives: the diagnosis of a terminal illness, the death of a loved one, the car accident involving a friend. These serve to remind you that death is an enemy that stalks even you. It can be discouraging, even depressing—no wonder many seek to deny it or embrace it as a kind friend: the world is full of desperate, despairing, hopeless people!

Frightening in all this is that this is only physical death I am talking about. The hordes of conquerors that visited Zebulun and Naphtali certainly ended the earthly lives of thousands of people. The tragedies and atrocities that happen today, without a doubt, terminated the physical lives of many more thousands of people. Yet, hear what the Word of the Lord has to say: “[D]o not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28)

The myriad of tragedies that claim the lives of many, many people and the participation in the death of countless helpless people are but symptoms of a larger problem: sin. Here are people in open defiance of God’s Word stemming all the way back to Adam, through whom the whole earth (yes, even the land) was cursed! Those who continue to reject God’s grace are dead in their own trespasses and sin. It only makes sense that those who are dead will seek to find in death a friend and comforter.

Fear not, however, for God’s Word declares an even greater comfort and solace: “[T]he 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.” Death may always seem near, but the Word of God is even more so, and He has already conquered death for you by His own death on the cross, and He has for you a life that will not end even as He has been raised from the dead!

There is no need for fear, because in this world that is darkened by sin, the Light of the World continues to come and illumine those who sit in darkness. He faithfully visits people, finding His own, be they hundreds or thousands of miles away or right in your own back yards. The Word of God spread as Jesus traveled from town to town in Zebulun and Naphtali. The Word of God was proclaimed to those sitting in darkness. It continues to be spread the same way. Jesus gathered His disciples and told them to go and make disciples of all nations, to spread His Word. The same still happens today as disciples of Jesus tell of the Word of God; through them, light shines on those sitting in darkness. People hear the Word and follow. They come to church to be Baptized, to receive Holy Absolution, and to receive the body and blood of the Word—to be forgiven of all their sins.

And, just as it was back then, these means look simple and ineffective. But the Word of the Lord endures and is constant. He works through the same means, for by the same means He still creates faith and gives eternal life to all who would believe. Once again, He could wave His arms, flash some lightning, and, poof, make believers of the entire world. But that’s not the way God works; He works by His Word. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing of the Word of God (cf. Romans 10:17)—and so He is proclaimed: hope is announced as His all-availing sacrifice is proclaimed as that which saves people from their sins, and as His resurrection is heralded as that which gives you victory over death! It is as was said through the prophet Isaiah: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread

to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10-11)
Word fulfilled!

So, despite the setbacks and difficulties encountered, the Word of God continues to visit His people, bringing with Him forgiveness of sins and life and salvation—the treasures He has won for you on the cross. He brings with Him hope for those living in the land of the shadow of death, hope because death is merely a shadow for those who have received the Word of God. Yes, it is dark and frightening, but for those who die in Christ, it passes and is gone, for the Word of God declares:

“O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55-57)

Yes, this is a dying world. In it, death is feared; death is befriended; death is means of improving quality of life. Yet, through it all, the Lord of Life visits His people and reveals Himself to the world through His Word. He has come that you may have life, and that you may have it to the fullest, for He has come and forgiven you for all of your sins!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.