

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 25, 2026
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
A bright light shines in a dark place.

When Jesus heard that John was put in prison, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴ He did this to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵ Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles,

¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light,
and on those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death a light has dawned.

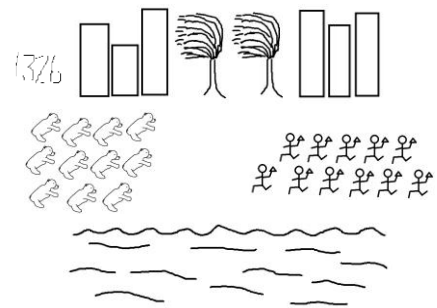
¹⁷ From that time, Jesus began to preach: "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near."

²³ Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people.

—Matthew 4:12-17,23 EHV

A while back a farmer in Minnesota made an intriguing discovery. As he was clearing his field of stones, he stumbled upon a large stone that had some drawings on it. These drawings have stumped archeologists until just recently. They have been in the dark for quite some time, but just recently the lights have turned on. I have a picture of these drawings which I printed for you on this page.

There are numbers on the upper left-hand corner which read "1326." We discover some rectangular-shaped objects with what appear to be blowing trees. Underneath are eleven bears facing eleven men with triangular shaped items in their hands. It was thought that those must be stones. Underneath is what appears to be a body of water.



For quite some time, archeologists were in the dark and could not figure out what these drawings meant. But earlier this year, they made the discovery. The lights turned on. The numbers "1326" refer to the year that these drawings were made. So, it was 700 years ago. Evidently, it is a prediction of a great battle that would take place in the future. We have discovered that the rectangles and blowing trees are a reference to a "Windy City." Between the Windy City and a body of water is where the battle will take place. It has been determined that the triangular shaped items in the people's hands are not stones, but they are blocks of cheese. Therefore, this was a prophecy of the battle that took place between the Bears and the Packers in 2026. And it was an epic battle that took place along the waters of Lake Michigan, in the Windy City.

Now, is that a ridiculous story? Of course, it's not true. A farmer didn't really find a stone with these drawings on it. We would laugh if somebody declared that 700 years ago somebody could predict that the Chicago Bears would take on the Green Bay Packers in the NFC Wild Card Game. The United States wasn't even formed at that time. Football wasn't even thought of. It is ridiculous to think about a prediction, a prophecy, that points to something like that, right? Nobody could predict that.

But what about the words that we read from Matthew 4? You believe those words, right? Matthew is essentially revealing to us a fulfillment of words that were written 700 years before they took place. We heard the words from Isaiah in our first lesson for today. He talks about a land of utter darkness, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, along the way of the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. And Isaiah predicted that a bright light would shine forth on the people living in that land. And Matthew tells us that Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy. God has turned the lights on in your heart, and you believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of these words written 700 years earlier, right?

That prophecy and fulfillment are true. Those words from Isaiah are coming from God Almighty who can see into the future and who can deliver his words of promises and fulfill them.

A battle took place there. It was a battle between the light and the darkness. And we see the results of that battle. **A bright light shines in a dark place.**

Isaiah was a prophet who lived 700 years before Jesus came into this world. God's people had always been waiting and wondering when the Promised Messiah would arrive. And 700 years before Jesus was in this world, the prophet Isaiah said that he would begin his ministry in the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. This was in the northern part of Israel. This was along the Jordan River in the area of Galilee.

Now, marketing experts would say that this was the worst place to begin ministry. It was dark. It was full of evil. From history, we know the northern tribes broke away from the Lord when they separated from the southern tribe of Judah. 700 years before Jesus was born, the Assyrians conquered the land. They hauled the best people away into slavery and inserted their own people into the land. The darkness that came with the worship of Baal now combined with the darkness that came with the false gods of the Assyrians. And that stayed that way.

So, when Jesus began his ministry in this region, he encountered a great darkness. Think of what he experienced when he came in contact with many demon-possessed people. Think of the man who was demon-possessed in the region of the Gerasenes. That man didn't just have one demon that possessed him. He had a legion. There were at least 2,000 demons in that man.

It was in this darkness that Jesus began preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. It was in this darkness that **"Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people."** That's where a battle took place. It was a battle between light and darkness.

We're told that Jesus withdrew into this land of darkness after John the Baptist was thrown into prison. **"When Jesus heard that John was put in prison, he withdrew into Galilee. He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali."**

When Jesus hears about the great darkness in King Herod, Jesus actually retreats and goes into even more darkness by making Galilee the headquarters for his ministry. He goes to Capernaum.

But isn't that exactly how God operates? God doesn't keep away from darkness; he enters into it. Why? Because only light can drive out darkness.

This past Monday we celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day. He used this imagery when he wrote in his 1963 book *Strength to Love*, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that." That's exactly what God does in our lives. In the darkness of this world, Jesus enters and shines his light and his love. John writes in his Gospel, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"** (John 3:16,17 EHV).

Jesus didn't come to this world to live a separate life from those who were in darkness. He came to live among the darkness, not to condemn people, but to shine his light and save people. That's what he was doing in Galilee. 700 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah said, **"Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and on those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death a light has dawned."**

The people of Galilee who were living in darkness saw a great light when Jesus went through the towns and villages proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. And what was his message of light? Matthew tells us. **"From that time, Jesus began to preach: 'Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.'"** To repent means to come out of the kingdom of darkness and unbelief and come into the kingdom of Jesus' love and forgiveness.

There are only two kingdoms in this world. There is the kingdom of darkness, and there is the kingdom of light. In the kingdom of darkness, Satan rules the lives of people. He convinces them they are safe living in this world of darkness where they foolishly think everything is okay with them and their God because they are trying to live a halfway decent life. In this kingdom of darkness, people are totally comfortable making excuses for how they are living their lives even though it is contrary to what God tells us in his Word or even what they feel in their own consciences.

Sin loves the darkness. It is like a cockroach that loves the darkness. They love to spread their dirt and filth under the cover of darkness. They don't want the light. If you turn on the light, they will scatter.

Well, Jesus calls us out of the darkness with his words, **"Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near."** To repent means to say, "I can't stay in this darkness any longer. I need help. I need Jesus to rescue me and take me into his kingdom where he will forgive me and protect me and give me eternal life." John talks about this in our second reading for today. **"This is how we know that we have known him: if we keep his commands. The one who says, 'I know him,' but does not keep his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. If anyone**

keeps God's word, the love of God is truly made complete in him. This is how we know that we are in him: The one who says he remains in him should walk as Jesus walked" (1 John 2:3-6). In other words, you can't live in the light and in the darkness at the same time. We can't say, "I follow Jesus" and then live our lives contrary to what he has given in his word. It doesn't work like that. Remember that light drives out darkness.

So, Jesus comes and preaches, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**" It's a changed mindset that says, "I can't stay in this darkness any longer. I need help. I need Jesus to rescue me and bring me into his light."

And that's exactly what he does. Jesus has the power to forgive you and to give you a new life. Not even 2,000 demons can oppose Jesus. Do you remember what he did? He cast those demons out of that man and into 2,000 pigs. Jesus' light casts the darkness away. And your life is evidence of that fact.

In the darkest days of your life, Jesus has been there for you telling you again and again that you are in his kingdom and he is the King of kings and Lord of lords who is protecting you. In his kingdom, you know that nothing in all creation will ever separate you from his love. A bright light came into the great darkness in Galilee, and a bright light has come into the darkness of your life.

And that means that you have a changed life. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that." You see, my friends, *you* are now the **bright light that shines in a dark place**. Amen.