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## *Land of Zebulun, Land of Naphtali*

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**A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**Epiphany 3A**

*"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
On the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles,  
The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,  
And for those who sat in the region and shadow of death  
Light has dawned."  
--Matthew 4:15-16*

Certainly the last two weeks here in Atlanta have shown us something of deep gloom and darkness. It didn't start that way. Many of us delighted in the first two days of snow and ice recently, when all the schools and much of the city was shut down; and we rushed outside with our children and our makeshift sleds and slid down every slope in town.

That was fun. But then, Then the ice persisted. It hardened, like a forbidden, frozen moat outside our castles, and trapped us! It held us captive in our own homes and neighborhoods. We couldn't get out! Some of us had not spent that much extended time with family since, since forever!

Some managed. And some were ready for the sun!

Then, instead of the sun, how gloomy and gray the past two weeks have been, even when we were able to return to routines! Our weather has been the very model of winter: cold and gray, and dare I say it, depressing. It has been the kind of weather that prompts writers and pundits to talk about the winter doldrums.

And into this darkness, into this winter grayness, when our days are at their shortest, comes the season of Epiphany. You will not see this season on any of our secular calendars at the grocery stores. Even most churchgoers know only the Feast of Epiphany, January 6, when we sing "We Three Kings of Orient Are," the last of the twelve days of Christmas.

I love, not just the *day* of the Epiphany, but the *season* of Epiphany. For this season, which will last until Ash Wednesday, is about light. The three kings followed the light, the star, and were rewarded with the manifestation of the Messiah, the baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

But the days after that feast, the season of Epiphany, are about the growing of that light. The Light of Christ is meant to grow in the season of Epiphany. In the midst of winter gloom and darkness, we, the Church, are meant to be burning with a greater light, the Light of Christ.

Isaiah says in our lesson for today, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned!"

That is meant to be our theme during the season of Epiphany. We are children of the light, with the mission of shining that light into the world. I like to think of the season of Epiphany as the season of evangelism-not evangelism in a coerced way, of course. We have a message, a message of good news, for the world. It is the gospel of good news in a world filled with bad news. It is the gospel of light in a world enshrouded in gloom.

Many of us love singing the Third Song of Isaiah during this season:

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you. For behold, darkness covers the land; deep gloom enshrouds the peoples. But over you the Lord will rise, and his glory will appear upon you." (Isaiah 60.1-2)

Invite your neighbors to church during this season! Invite your neighbors to something good. Go out into the world with the message of light and hope! The God of grace has been revealed! The Light of Christ!

The Church of Jesus Christ has a message meant for the entire world during this season. This is why our Epiphany lessons speak of Christ being made known to the nations, to the Gentiles, to foreigners. The light of God has been revealed. There is hope in the midst of despair. There is light in the midst of darkness.

And so the Gospel of Matthew, in our gospel for today, repeats the great prophecy: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light!"

Land of Zebulun! Land of Naphtali! But, today, do any of you actually know where Zebulun is? Or where Naphtali is? We think of them as distant and foreign lands, don't we?

Well, Zebulun is actually not too far away from here. It's a little town about fifty miles due south of where we are right now, Atlanta, Georgia. It's down in Pike County, just down the road from where I grew up. Zebulun, Georgia.

Okay, I know. I guess St. Matthew was not talking about that Zebulun. And neither was the great prophet Isaiah, who originally declared those words, in Isaiah chapter nine. Isaiah was speaking from Jerusalem, way down south, in Judah, in the middle of the eighth century, BC. He, too, was talking about how a coming King would bring light. The coming king would bring light even to places far away from Jerusalem and Judah, foreign-type places, Gentile places, like Zebulun and Naphtali.

But do you know how far Zebulun and Naphtali actually were from Jerusalem? Well, about sixty or seventy miles. Not far away at all. Just up the road, actually. The land of Zebulun in Galilee was just as far from Jerusalem as Zebulun, Georgia is from North Atlanta.

Zebulun and Naphtali seemed like a long way away. They had become foreign places. The prophecy of Isaiah was that those distant lands, those Gentile lands, would nevertheless see the light. But those lands were actually right in their own back yard. (Some people here might consider Zebulun, Georgia as a distant land, too; but it's actually right in our back yard!)

The point is that the wider world, that distant world, that foreign world to which we always look in Christian mission, actually begins right outside our door. We emphasize taking the light of Christ to the wider world during the season of Epiphany, but that wider world is actually very close to us.

And when that wider world is very close to us, speaking the good news to that world is more difficult. It's relatively easy, for instance, to say that we sure do love the whole world, when we have never seen most of them; but it's much harder to say we love our next door neighbor, who we see every day.

I am reminded of that delightful Peanuts cartoon, drawn by Charles Schulz, which featured Lucy the tough-minded psychiatrist. In one frame, she proclaims, "I love humankind!" In the next frame she adds, "It's people I can't stand." "I love humankind; it's people I can't stand."

Our Epiphany mission, to take the light of Christ into the world, into foreign territories, does not actually start in those places. Our Epiphany mission starts right at home, in our own country, in our own neighborhoods, in our own workplace.

In fact, our Epiphany mission of light and love started two weeks ago, when we were trapped in our homes and condominiums and apartment buildings. We had to be nice to people in a different way, especially to our own families! One day it was easy to love them, but the next day, not so easy.

The land of Zebulun and Naphtali is not far away. It's right next door. That's where the worldwide mission of proclaiming the good news begins. The worldwide mission begins at home. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali was home to Jesus; it was where he grew up. And so, even Jesus began his ministry at home. He began his ministry by calling people who were already in families. He called a set of brothers, Andrew and his brother Simon, who worked together. Jesus then called the sons of Zebedee, James and John, brothers, who had to get along together. The ministry of Jesus began in families.

If we can bring light to the dark and gloomy days right around us, right now, then we have begun the mission of taking light to the world beyond us. In the next weeks, turn to your family. Turn to your neighborhood. Turn to those you work with. Turn to your community. Turn to your world, and say, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you!"

AMEN.

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