

Now may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A friend once told me that it took five minutes to walk from his house to the pub at the end of the road, but after a few beers and on the way back it took him 25 minutes to walk home. The difference he said was staggering.

Beer is not the only thing that makes us walk slowly. So does darkness. How long do you think it would take to walk from one end of the church to the other 10, 12 seconds? Imagine if all the lights were turned off. We were in complete darkness, how long it would take. Much longer. We'd be stumbling around, shuffling down the aisle, worried about going the wrong way, falling down the stairs. The darkness would slow us down. And I wanted this sermon to draw a contrast between walking in the dark and walking in the light. And I'm picking up on a theme, which we see at the beginning of our reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. We heard this in our first reading. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." And that prophecy is fulfilled in the gospels with the coming of Jesus, the light of the world, and in the gospels, we see how the disciples in the company of Jesus don't stumble and shuffle. They stride out in faith.

The gospel reading from Matthew is presented to us as a fulfillment of that Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah, and the gospel writer invites us to make that link. Nazareth where Jesus made his home is in Israel's land of Zebulun. And Capernaum, where he moved to make the HQ of his ministry is in Naphtali, both towns mentioned by Isaiah. And John's gospel makes explicit the promise that the light of the world has come. We read this in his famous prologue, "In Jesus Christ was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." As Jesus himself said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The disciples who Jesus called by the sea of Galilee were not called to walk in darkness, but to walk with the light of life. And look how Jesus calls. Of course if Jesus had been English, which we know he wasn't, just on the evidence of this story, he would have inquired politely of the fishermen whether they had any interest, if it wasn't too much trouble, if they didn't have anything else to do, whether they wouldn't mind just tagging along for a bit, see how they found it. But that isn't how Jesus spoke in his non-English kind of way. He issued them an invitation or almost a command. Follow me.

And how do they respond? Do they ask for time to think about it? Do they even stop to clean their nets? No, they left their nets and followed him, it's said. They don't shuffle along begrudgingly behind Jesus, they stride out. They are walking in and with the light. So what's distinctive about walking in the light? Well first there's confidence, walking with purpose as the disciples do here. It says, "Immediately they left their nets and followed him." They were called with a purpose, they were called to fish for people. And that's a phrase that's been interpreted in many different ways over the years. And it's important for us to have some understanding of what it means because the calling that came to those first disciples is the calling for us. Jesus's followers and disciples today who still respond to that call to follow me. This is the task incumbent upon us.

So what does it mean to fish for people? Well, here's a story which might go some way to illuminating and answering that question. It's about a couple who took their children, a son aged 11, a daughter age seven to Carlsbad Caverns, which some of you may know well. And as always with the tour, when they reached the deepest, darkest point in the caverns, the guy turned the light off, plunged them all into complete darkness to illustrate the silence and the darkness of being underground. The little girl, suddenly enveloped in this darkness, was frightened and began to cry. Then she heard her brother saying, "Don't cry. Somebody here knows how to turn on the lights."

The call on us, as followers of Jesus, is to let people know that the light has come. We are not abandoned in the dark. Death and darkness will never have the last word. We know someone who has turned on the light. The disciples stride out confidently after Jesus because they trust him. They don't shuffle. They don't walk fearfully. They stride out. Trust is the opposite of fear. See how our Psalm begins, "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom then shall I fear?" The disciples trusted Jesus and there was no fear in their walk.

And walking in the light makes us aware of others. Darkness is very isolating and lonely. We can feel alone in the dark, but as people of the light we walk in the company of others. Peter and Andrew was soon walking with James and John, and very quickly a new alternative community was born, a community of Jesus' followers, which now stretches all over the world. Many different people, different nations, at this time, on this day, will be gathering as we are to worship the Jesus who called these disciples, who we all recognize as the light of the world.

And what an undramatic beginning to such an important movement. It all starts with four ordinary fishermen, busy doing their work. Those called to follow Jesus and walk with him have never been required to be particularly special or holy. They have always been ordinary people going about their daily business, responding to His call, and putting their faith and trust in Him and daring to pick up the invitation to follow me.

This season of epiphany reminds us that the light of the world has come. A light that shone for 2000 years is no less bright today than it was walking by the sea of Galilee. The light beckons us to walk without fear in the world, building God's alternative kingdom and community with all God's people. So let's be a people who walk in the light, who aren't content to shuffle along and stumble around in the darkness.

And on this day of our annual meeting, I've had cause this week to reflect on our life as a church.

And it occurs to me that we at St. James have not had a year shuffling. We've had a good year. There are signs of health and growth as people join our community. Our finances, as we'll hear later, are good. We've had a significant increase in our member giving in recent years, and we're walking together with a purpose. Last week on Outreach Sunday, we highlighted many of the different ways in which our parish touches the lives of people outside our community, as we build partnerships beyond our walls. We're called to worship and grow in faith. So I'm full of hope. Let's continue to be a people that stride out in faith and walk in the light, God's beautiful light. Amen.