

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-4

Isaiah emphasizes in these words the joy that the Messiah would bring to all people. People who had lived in darkness would have light. The “yoke of their burden” would be broken and “the staff on their shoulders” and the “rod of their oppressor” would be gone! Their “gladness” would be increased.

Why did the Messiah come? When we read Isaiah’s words, it becomes evident that His journey was essential, but why? The great *oppressor* in all of our lives is sin. Satan’s lies lead us into rebellion against God and into sin and separation from our Creator.

A yoke is a heavy, wooden harness of sorts worn by oxen. Hooked to it was the oxen’s load. Sin is a yoke which bears us down to the ground, unable to pull the load of guilt associated with it. Jesus removed the yoke of sin to replace it with the joyful yoke of His love. The staff and the rod to which Isaiah refers remind us of the slavery of sin. Not only is the burden too heavy to bear and the yoke impossible to escape, but the staff and rod continually beat upon souls that yearn to be free from sin’s toil. Only through Jesus were the rod and staff removed. Without Him, we would be without hope. Yet, how lightly we sometimes treat God’s gift of salvation. We forget that our devastation was complete until Christ won our freedom!

Isaiah couldn’t fully comprehend how a Rescuer could come and bear the sins of the world, conquering sin and Satan on our behalf. Isaiah certainly could not have known that the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali would be joined to form the Galilee of Jesus’ time, but he knew that his nation could not rescue themselves from their trouble. He knew that only God could do that. The people of Jesus’ time believed that they had to work their way into God’s favor, yet they also knew that no matter how hard they tried, it couldn’t be done. They felt the yoke of sin and the rod of its slavery. They felt great joy at the coming of the Messiah! The gift of God’s salvation is now a reality. We don’t have to look forward to Jesus’ coming. He is here, and we are free by His grace and mercy!

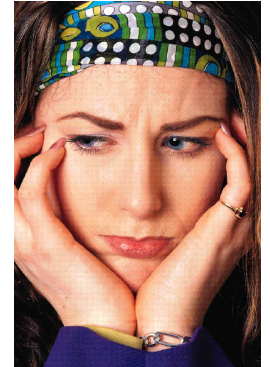
Now is the best time to join a Bible study.

(A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee)

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-4

1. Using a Bible commentary or map find out about Zebulun and Naphtali in the time of Isaiah?
2. The prophecy becomes very significant in the time of Jesus. How is Isaiah’s prophecy fulfilled in today’s Gospel reading (Matthew 4:12-16)?
3. How is sin like a “darkness” (vs. 2)? What does it mean for Jesus to be our “light”?
4. How is sin like a “yoke” (vs. 4)? How did Jesus remove that burden?
5. What is the dominant emotion of vs. 3? How do we find our joy in Jesus?
6. We have explored prophecies from Isaiah for the past two months. Have you found a favorite verse or theme in this book? How has this Old Testament Word been a blessing to your life?



Second Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Samuel 3:1-10

We are all amazed at those times when God touches our hearts to be in service to Him. Whether it's teaching Sunday School, preaching, cooking for a circle meeting, collecting for a charity, attending Sunday School, or sharing Christ with a friend or co-worker, it is a special time of connection with our Lord. Sometimes the most wonderful part of the experience is in realizing that as sinful, prideful, and self-centered as we are, our God still loves us and wants us to be part of His ministry here in the world.

The story of young Samuel reminds us of something that may be even more wonderful. Not only does God use spiritually immature older folks, He also uses spiritually immature people who aren't even twenty years old yet—He uses teenagers. We don't know Samuel's exact age, but it would appear that he was just in his early teens, just about the time that we often think that kids lose what intelligence we thought they might possess. The hormones are taking over and the common-sense side of the brain seems to be shutting down. Yet God chose this young boy to be His prophet.

And what can we learn from Eli? At first it didn't occur to him that God might be speaking to Samuel. When he finally realized that indeed God might be calling the boy, Eli did not tell him that his imagination was overactive from too much pizza for supper. He didn't tell him that he was too young or that his schedule was already too full or that he wasn't reliable enough to be a part of ministry. Eli told Samuel to listen to God. Eli even listened to Samuel to find out what God might have to say to him, the priest of the Lord's Temple. After that, Eli continued to help and train Samuel as a servant of God.



Teenagers are sometimes difficult—and so are adults. They are rash—and so are adults. Adults forget that they are God's tools in the church and world and so do teenagers. All ministry would be more effective if all of God's tools were working together. If you are an old person (age 35 to 95), get to know a teenager. If you are a teenager (age 13 to 19), get to know an old person.

Ever consider a multi-generation Bible Study? It's fun!

A message from your District Education Committee

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Samuel 3:1-10

1. How did Samuel come to live and serve in the company of Eli, the priest? (Review 1 Samuel, chapter 2 to find out about Hannah's prayer and her response).



2. Who did Samuel assume was calling him? Why was this a safe assumption?
3. How did Samuel respond to God's call? (vs. 10) How is Samuel's response a good model for us?
4. What does verse 1 tell us about this period of Old Testament history? Had God forgotten about his people?
5. Samuel grows to serve the Lord faithfully. What are some Old Testament incidents in which we meet this prophet?
6. Does God still call his people? In what ways might he call us today? Are we listening? Are we ready to answer?

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-4

All the sinners of the ages, whether Gentile or Jew, received the light of God in Christ. John says *“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”* (John 1:4-5) Why is it that the Life and Light of men and women was with us but was rejected? Who rejected it?

There were and are those in the world to whom God seems not only distant, but irrelevant. He is just an interloper demanding more than He deserves. The one who rejects Him believes that all he needs resides within himself. It is these who continue to stumble from wall to wall in the darkness of sin until death consumes them. The greatest tragedy is that they don't even recognize their plight.

However, for those granted spiritual eyes, along with the Light came forgiveness like a huge torrent of cleansing water covering them from head to foot, freeing them from sin, fear, doubt, and turmoil. Those who see the light of Christ revealing evil for what it is run to the light for safety and relief. In Jesus, it is said, we find not only salvation, but rest.

The light of Christ exposed the darkness of men's hearts and also offered the cure. His own blood delivered us all from the power of darkness and sin. There is more to the story, however than our joyous assurance of salvation in Christ.

The Old Testament nation of Israel failed to present the world with the true God. They rebelled, turned inward, and failed their Lord. In verse one Isaiah says that the Gentile believers will be added to the ranks of the believing members of the nation of Israel. Together they have become the spiritual people of God.

Like Old Testament Israel, we are saved for a purpose. Though it is wonderful to celebrate the forgiveness and love that we have in Jesus, we should also celebrate our mission as His people. As Ephesians 2:10 says, we are “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” So, we ponder the question of how we can share the Light of the world in our own time.

Learn more about God's mercy and love in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee.

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-4

1. What part of this text is repeated in today's Gospel lesson Matthew 4:12ff.? Was all of Jesus' ministry a fulfillment of God's plan?
2. In what “darkness” have people of all ages walked? Who is the Light?
3. According to verse 3, those who encounter Jesus experience _____ . What joys has Jesus brought you?
4. What victory does Isaiah remember in vs. 4 (Judges 7:22-25)? What greater victories were to be anticipated?
5. The effect of God's light is noted in “Amazing Grace” (LW 509, vs. 1). When did you “see the light”?
6. We share the joy of Jesus in all seasons (with a special emphasis in the Epiphany season). Who are the burdened and oppressed (vs. 4) in your family, your congregation, your community? What Good News do you have to share with them?

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Paul's letters were not written just so we could benefit from his wisdom and faithfulness two thousand years later. The churches of Paul's time often sent serious questions to the apostle, seeking his instruction as their pastor. Paul was unmarried and some wondered if this was because Jesus had instructed him to remain single. Apparently one of the questions from the Corinthian congregation concerned whether one should marry or whether a father should even arrange for his daughter to marry. Was it wise to do so, considering the dangerous situation in which Christians lived? What if one married and it distracted the believer from dedication to Christ? What if one married and then hardship developed into a threat against life itself? Paul's answer to them still applies today.

Though we now safely blend into the world around us, living out our lives without thought of danger or of being drawn away from our faith, we can still value the wisdom of Paul's teaching. His primary message was this—Don't let anything stand in the way of keeping Jesus first in your life. Whether we are married or single, widowed or divorced, in the midst of danger or safety, we have one Center in our lives. That Center is Jesus. We look to Him as our example for living God-glorifying lives. We depend on the Holy Spirit, whom He has sent, to guide us and strengthen us.

Paul says at the beginning of this section that he does not have a specific message from the Lord on marriage, but that he believes that his wisdom is true. He does not intend to say that we should not marry, or grieve, or be happy. He encourages the Corinthians and us to live every day as though we were coming into the presence of Jesus now! We should love, laugh, serve, and care as though our lives will go on forever, but at the same time reflect the assurance that whatever we have here is only temporary; that what we truly value is eternal and guaranteed. We are people called to live life in the sure knowledge that Jesus is Lord!

Learn more about our assurance as Christians in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

1. Skim the verses preceding and following this lesson from I Corinthians chapter 7. What is the primary topic of this portion of the Apostle Paul's letter?
2. Is the Apostle Paul speaking against marriage, mourning, happiness (vs. 29-30)? Why is he calling for a refocusing or re-arranging of priorities?
3. "Time is short" and "this world is passing away" are more typically end of the church year or Advent season messages. Why is this warning important in the Epiphany season?

For Family Reflection

4. How does your family often focus on "the things of the world"? How can you focus more intentionally on the things of Jesus?
5. Paul's perspective on marriage is summarized in vs. 17, "Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him." How is marriage a gift to you? How is your role as a single person God's gift to you?
6. Epiphany is the mission season. Because "time is short" who is your family praying for that they will come to know Jesus? With whom can you share the Good News of Jesus?

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 12:12-21; 26-27

The first verses of chapter 12 formed last week's text. In the earlier verses Paul pointed out that spiritual gifts are God-given for the good of the body. He noted that an individual's gift is not chosen by him or her, but is assigned by God. Today Paul continues his teaching by defining just who the "body" is and how it is made up.

Paul's analogy is pretty clear, we are the body of Christ. Each of us is a member of the body and each has a unique gift to use in helping the body function well. We are also the body of Christ that the world sees. Each Christian congregation is the manifestation of Christ to the community in which it serves. The conduct and priorities of the congregation demonstrate Christ and Christianity to that community.

When we recognize the importance of each church member; when we care for one another, respect one another, depend on one another, and work together, we demonstrate to our communities (and our children), the relationship that God wants for us. When each member of the body discards human ego in favor of a serving and caring heart, both the congregation and the community will see and feel the difference. They will experience Christ's love.

All of that sounds great, but it isn't easy to achieve. If it were easy, Paul would not have had to write about it so intensely. The perfect body structure would have naturally occurred without effort. Unfortunately our world is much like Paul's. As in his time, our drive to be the best, the most important, the most listened to, or the most applauded gets in the way of being an integral part of a healthy church body. We tend to categorize spiritual gifts according to our own value system, while in God's eyes every person and his or her gift forms an equally essential part of the body.

Especially in our American culture, it is difficult to function according to, or even accept, God's value system. It is against our nature not to compete and build ourselves up as individuals. It's a problem, but a problem that God has forgiven in Christ. He can help us recognize the unique value of each body member, and appreciate each one's part in the work of ministry.

Learn more about God's gifts in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 12:12-21; 26-27

1. Whose "body" is the church? (vs. 12, 27) Why?
2. Which part of the body is most important? Why are all parts equal?
3. Read also vs. 22-25. How does this illustration speak to disputes and divisions in the church?

For Family Reflection

4. Can you think of a part of the "body" of your church or family that is suffering? Pray for those members of the church body.
5. If you have a toothache does only the tooth area hurt? If you have something in the eye, does only the eye hurt? If one person in the church or family is hurting, who else is hurting?
6. If you were to compare yourself to one part of the body which part would you pick? Why?

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 4:12-25

Shortly after His time of temptation in the desert, Jesus learns of the arrest of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great. This Herod was guilty of seducing his sister-in-law (while she was still married to his half-brother, who was also her uncle). Their story is an example of the moral turmoil going on in the leadership of Palestine and the entire Empire. John condemned Herod. Herod's angered wife maneuvered him into arresting John and later executing him. During this time, Jesus begins choosing His disciples.

The first two disciples chosen by Jesus were brothers and fishermen, as were the second two. They "immediately" left their work to follow Jesus. Had they met Him before? We do not know. Whatever the situation, they found Jesus' call to join Him compelling. Although their fishing continued from time to time, their focus was changed forever. No matter what they faced after that day, Jesus was their focus. Most of them died rather than turn from Him. Jesus also chooses each of us to be His own. In our baptism, He takes us to Himself as His possession. He takes us from Satan's power and grants us eternal life with Him.

How did the disciples react to being chosen by Jesus? Not only did they know Jesus as Savior, but also as Master and Teacher. How were they able to do this? According to Luther, the Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, sanctifies and enlightens" us. That means that the Holy Spirit enables us to know Jesus and to follow Him each day—just as the disciples did. Like them we do not follow perfectly, but by God's grace we can endeavor each day to know Him better.

Are you focusing on Jesus as Master and Teacher, as well as Savior? He is our Salvation, but He is also our Master who seeks to carry us through every day as His children.

Please consider joining an adult Bible study. It will make your daily walk with Jesus even more blessed! Talk to your pastor about weekly Bible study opportunities.

A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 4:12-25

1. Jesus begins His preaching ministry. Where did He begin preaching? What was His message?
2. Jesus begins His teaching ministry. Who were His first students? Why were they an unusual class of students?
3. Jesus begins His healing ministry. Who did He heal? Why did He do healing miracles?
4. The Gospel of Matthew includes many Old Testament quotations. Who first shared the words of vs. 15-16? According to vs. 14 why is Jesus fulfillment important?

For Family Reflection

5. In what ways is your church preaching, teaching, and healing? How is our ministry the same as Jesus' ministry? How is our ministry different?
6. What does it mean to be a "fisher of men"? What do we use for "bait"? What happens when people "fish" are caught?

Third Sunday After The Epiphany

Mark 1:14-20

“Immediately” they followed him. They may have heard Him preach before, but His work was just beginning. In the midst of their own work when the call came, they dropped everything to follow Jesus. Their lives would never be the same. Most of them died for their belief in, and witness about, Him. Why did they follow? Why did they stay, and how?

The *why* and the *how* is our wonderful God. Jesus called the disciples. They did not volunteer out of their own wisdom or strength. No one has the courage to do that. We cannot overcome the fear within our sinful nature. The disciples, and all of God’s saints through the ages, could not “find” Him. He came, He found, He saved, He enabled them. Because of Jesus, His disciples could “immediately” accept the call to follow Him.

Following Jesus wasn’t easy. It meant putting Him first in literally everything. Simon and Andrew left fishing for fish to begin “fishing” for men—who could be far more difficult to net. James and John left not only their businesses, but also their father. Yet they went willingly.

Though these men were especially blessed to be with Jesus in His ministry, and we give them the title of Saint (Saint Matthew, Saint John, etc.) their lives were much like our own. We are all saints. We have all been sought out and chosen by Jesus. He chooses us even though we, like the disciples, often fail. We stumble, we struggle, and sometimes we succeed far beyond our own abilities. He strengthens; He loves; He encourages; He forgives; and He rejoices with us. After a while it becomes clear that the most wonderful thing about following Jesus isn’t that we are the followers, but that He is the Leader. No wonder the disciples followed *immediately!*

Are you in a weekly Bible study?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Third Sunday After The Epiphany

Mark 1:14-20

1. Mark’s Gospel makes a brief comment about John’s imprisonment. Go to Matthew 14:3-12 to find out the reason for this sentence and the ultimate fate of John the Baptist.
2. What was the content of Jesus’ message to the world (vs. 15)? Why was this “good news”?
3. What was the occupation of Jesus’ first disciples? How was Jesus going to change their calling?

For Family Reflection

4. The disciples left their nets and followed Jesus. What did (do) you have to leave behind to follow Him?
5. Jesus’ message to His world was “repent.” Why is this call still necessary today for the world and for each one of us individually? For what sins do you need to repent? What is God’s Good News to you?
6. An emphasis of the Epiphany season is witnessing to others. Where is God calling you to “go fishing” in your family, in your community, and into the world? Can your family (or your church) consider praying for and financially supporting a missionary?

Third Sunday After The Epiphany

Luke 4:16-30

Galilee was a small area in northern Palestine. According to a contemporary governor-turned-historian named Josephus, over three million people lived there. Jesus' hilltop hometown of Nazareth overlooked thirty miles of countryside. It was a beautiful place to live. The people of Galilee, and Nazareth, were considered wide open to new ideas, but when Jesus proclaimed His ministry in His home synagogue, it was the most revolutionary news that they had ever heard. And--they didn't like it.

A few years ago a politician remarked that he attended church "regularly." When pressed by a reporter, he responded that he attended church "ten or twelve times a year." I guess "regularly" depends on your point of view. Jesus attended worship regularly, but His definition of regularly was somewhat different from the politician's. Also, there was something more in Jesus attendance than just being there. He understood what His Father had in mind; what the prophets had said; the importance of prayerfully seeking His Father's will.

The majority of the synagogue members in Nazareth were present in body, but it appears that they were not spiritually alert to God's word or to His will, for they failed to recognize His Son.

What about us? Do we worship in expectation of growing our personal relationship with our Father? Do we listen to His word, or are we just taking up pew space on Sundays? If Jesus stood among us, would we recognize Him as the Son of God? Apparently His own neighbors didn't have the spiritual awareness to do so.

The Holy Spirit wants to lead us in our worship, whether in church on Sunday or in our private devotions. He reveals the truth to us about our Savior. The attitude of Nazareth should seriously remind us that we live in a world where even some "Christians" deny the truth about Jesus. It is our calling, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, to continually celebrate God's truth and affirm it in our lives every day.

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