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“The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light” (Matt 4:16, quoting Isa 9:1).

1 John 3:22—4:6; Matt 4:12-17, 23-25

At the very beginning of his public life, right after his desert temptations and return to Nazareth, Jesus hears that Herod Antipas has arrested John the Baptist and imprisoned him at his palace in Jerusalem. Jesus goes to Capernaum and begins his ministry by proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand and demonstrating its effects with a surge of healings and exorcisms. He then calls his first disciples from among the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that a “great light” would appear in the region as a sign of God’s presence. Matthew gives context to the moment by setting the stage. The arrest and eventual execution of John the Baptist casts an ominous shadow over Jesus, fresh from his encounter with Satan in the Judean desert. He knows that he is already being watched with suspicion by Herod and the Roman occupation, but he launches his mission anyway with a burst of preaching and miracles that signal God is at work through him.

Jesus’ goals may be transcendent and spiritual, but he is already immersed in the politics and power struggles of his time and place. What begins with miracles of healing and good news to the poor in Galilee will end with his crucifixion and death in Jerusalem. He is a light that will overcome the darkness that has held people in

gloom and fear. He will free the world from sin and death by the light of God's glory.

It is no surprise that, despite the gathering storm around him personally, Jesus tells people not to be afraid. Not even suffering and death can prevent God's purposes from being fulfilled. Jesus had already countered the lies, threats and seductions of Satan with the power of selfless love and sacrifice. Struck down, he will rise up to judge the world and renew all of creation in the image of God.

We, too, live in perilous times, and our religious beliefs will not escape the challenges that confront us as real people in a real world filled with risks and uncertainties. We might want to transcend the troubles that face millions of people every day in many parts of the world, but as members of the human family on a single fragile planet beset by danger, we are all in this together. Jesus has given us an example of how to live just and compassionate lives, and he has told us not to be afraid. God is at work in human events, and selfless love will always triumph over deceit, violence and despair.

Darkness only accentuates the light. Jesus has kindled the light of his love in our hearts, and the brightness of that love will show us the way forward.

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