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January 3, 2021

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“The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light” (Matthew 4:15).

1 John 3:22—4:6; Matt 4:12-17, 23-25

Today’s Gospel begins by describing Jesus’ movements after John the Baptist was arrested by Herod Antipas. Jesus was in Judea to be baptized, then retreated into the desert to be tempted. He emerges confirmed in his identity as God’s Suffering Servant and ready to begin his public ministry. To avoid Herod, Jesus departs for the hill country of Galilee, a region disparaged by the orthodox in Jerusalem as infected by Gentile influence and because it was accessible only by going through despised Samaria.

Jesus goes first to Nazareth, but then settles in Capernaum, the large fishing city by the Sea of Galilee. There he will call his first disciples and begin preaching. His presence is for Matthew the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that a great light would appear to a people who lived in darkness and the shadow of death (Isa 8:23). Jesus is that “light to the nations.” His words bring the light of truth and renewed life manifested in a burst of physical healings and exorcisms.

Not everyone welcomes the light Jesus is bringing. Sin and corruption thrive in the shadows, infecting society with fear and distrust, spreading distortion and illness of all kinds. Herod executes John and will then conspire with the temple establishment and agents of the Roman occupation to eliminate Jesus. When his ministry later brings him to Jerusalem, Jesus will set off alarms by cleansing the temple, effectively exposing the nerve of complicity between Herod, the high priests and the Romans,

who have been dividing up the temple revenues. Within a week, Jesus will be arrested, tried and executed.

We do not have to look far to see how destructive lies and corruption can be to our institutions, public trust and the civil cohesion needed to hold society together. Without the light of truth, conspiracy theories and disinformation spread, inflaming political divisions and turning people against one another.

Jesus restored calm and health to people suffering from illnesses not unlike many of our current social maladies: “They brought to him all who were sick with various diseases and racked with pain, those who were possessed, lunatics and paralytics, and he cured them.” Jesus healed physical sickness by restoring to people the image of God present at creation. He was, in effect, addressing the darkness and saying, “Let there be light.”

Without light, we stumble and fall. We believe that Jesus is the light, the truth that sets us free and the integrity that restores relationships in families and social structures that make it possible to be good. Only this light can bring harmony, health and peace to our communities and to our world.

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