

If I were teaching a class called “Scary Story Writing – 101”, at the Adult Learning Center in the Villages” the very first thing my students would learn is how to write the beginning sentence of a scary story. I would have them use the classic line: “it was a dark and stormy night.” You see, darkness sets the tone for a creepy account. If you have ever watched a syfy horror movie, you know what I mean. The scariest parts of horror movies almost always take place at night. The most chilling time in one of those movies is when the character is walking though a darkened house, not knowing who is around the next corner, not able to see the danger hidden in the darkness. And then all of a sudden, the danger jumps out at them.

We learn from an early age to be fearful of darkness. That’s why nightlights are so popular in little children’s bedrooms: because that little 4-watt bulb is able to chase away just some of the darkness and bring a huge measure of comfort to a little one afraid of the dark. And even as we grow up, there is still an inborn fear of the dark. If you hear a strange noise in your house while it is the middle of the afternoon, you might think, “that’s a little odd,” and not even give it a second thought. But if you hear a strange sound in your totally darkened house at 3:00 in the morning, there is going to be considerably more fear. Darkness is uncomfortable. Darkness is confusing. Darkness is terrifying.

Imagine the agony of God as He surveys the darkness of life on our planet: Selfishness, anger, hatred, murder, rape, and war. Imagine His despair as He beholds how we are bent on self-destruction. He offers us a better way, a way of abundant living and yet we waste our lives in the frivolous pursuit of status, pleasure, wealth, and power.

He says, “Come, walk in My light.” But we hold back. We stay in the shadows. But God wants us to step out from the shadows and walk in the full light of His love. It is time for all of us to see “A Great Light Shines in the Darkness”!

Our text begins with a land that was living in a scary darkness. “In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali...” and then a little later Isaiah describes these lands as “walking in darkness.” That leads us to two questions: 1. What were the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali? and 2. How were they in darkness? Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the 12 sons of Jacob, a.k.a. “Israel.” When the Israelites conquered the Land of Canaan, each of these 12 brothers received part of the former Land of Canaan. The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali got their land way to the North. How were they in darkness? These people opened themselves up to worshipping the fertility cult gods of the Canaanite people. On the tops of hills and in groves they worshipped Baal and tried to combine it with a false worship of the true God. As you traveled further south into Israel, the same type of behavior took place.

Finally the Lord had enough. He allowed the Assyrians to conquer the northern tribes, and take the best people away into captivity. The Assyrians dumped their worst people into the northern tribes, similar to what Castro did to us in the 1970’s when he allowed 100,000 prisoners to come to our shores in a variety of boats. It says in 2 Kings 17, “The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cutha, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim, and settled them in the towns of the Samaria to replace the Israelites. The land became an even greater land of darkness with heathen people from various lands intermingled with God’s people.

Zebulun and Naphtali were always the first to be attacked, they would be the last to be rid of an invader, and they would suffer longer than any other tribe. Even the

personality of these two tribes contributed to their reputation of being pushovers. Zebulun and Naphtali never had powerful armies; pretty much anyone who wanted to conquer them could.

It was a dark and stormy night living in Zebulun and Naphtali. In fact, often it was scary living under a gloomy cloud of uncertainty. The people in these lands must have constantly worried, "Am I going to actually harvest these fields I have planted, or will an army come and strip away my crops and leave me to starve to death? Will my family be safe, or will some invader come someday and murder us or carry us off into slavery?" I don't think we in the US can even imagine that stress and apprehension of living in a land that could be invaded at any time. What if your house could be destroyed at any time? What if your work and employment and savings could just be gone one day? What if your family could be taken hostage at any time?

But after this dark and stormy night, God was going to once again give them light. Isaiah wrote about these humbled lands, "in the future, [God] will honor Galilee of the Gentiles. We read in the Gospel for today that this region with its dark and stormy past was honored: honored to be the home of Jesus Christ for a great part of his ministry. It's one thing to have a king or a celebrity come and visit - but God Himself came and ate, drank, preached, and did miracles among them. Instead of going to Jerusalem first under His public ministry, His first place to visit was "mighty" Zebulun and Naphtali. What an honor and what a privilege it must have been, and Isaiah said just as much. In our Gospel reading it says of Jesus, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent for the kingdom of God is near.'" Jesus talked to these people about his kingdom. He told them about his love for them, his willingness to die for them, forgive them of their sins, and bring them into a kingdom of love unlike anything they had ever experienced before in their lives.

You and I have also known the darkness of living in the land of Zebulun or Naphtali. What the prophet Isaiah said about Galilee, we can see in our own land and its people. We are living in a land where people are walking in darkness. It is a darkness that leads me to think that I can have God on my own terms and not be held accountable for every sin that I have committed. It is a darkness that can lead me to believe that my own human effort makes me acceptable to God. It is a darkness where I may think it is right to offer one of my children as a sacrifice to the gods, or take a life within the womb and offer as an excuse the word, "Choice." Born into darkness I could be joining millions of pilgrims on a pilgrimage to Mecca, or I could be strapping bombs to myself to die believing I will have the highest levels of Allah's heaven. It is a darkness that tells me that sex before marriage is fine, that homosexuality and lesbianism are alternative lifestyles. It is a darkness that tells me to follow the gods of silver and gold. We come before the Lord determined to follow him but we become distracted and quickly fall into the ways of this world of darkness.

But into the darkness of our sins, Jesus comes. He says, "I am the light of the world. He who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus says, "I have come to live and to die for you. I have come to erase your shameful past, and to use my blood to make you look pure and holy in my sight. I did this not just by taking on human flesh, but by actually being bathed in your sins on the cross." When you sit here and hear that message - and you see that salvation is free of charge through faith in Christ - you then see the Light shining on the horizon. You see that God is not

going to condemn you because of your past, but that He has forgiven you.

Isaiah compares the joy of a Christian to the joy of a farmer who is paid for his crops. "They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest." At Open Bible, we have had some farming families as members. When harvest time finally comes around, and they are taking their crops to market, and getting a nice paycheck, what a great feeling. Finally, some income. And to hear about the Savior week after week, considering and pondering the depth of his love for you, marveling at the love of God the Father who would rather kill his own Son than to see us end up in hell, we reap the harvest of spiritual awe and happiness. Why would God love a sinner like me so much? I don't know, I don't understand, but he does. To have such a generous God on our side fills the Christian up with inexplicable joy.

Then there is another metaphor for happiness, "men rejoice when dividing the plunder...as in the day of Midian's defeat." You might recall a Bible character named Gideon. It was a dark and stormy night for this judge of Israel. He led a measly 300-man army against an enormous force from Midian; outnumbered something like 500-1. How did 300 soldiers of Israel fight this overwhelming army? With light! Instead of swords, they carried torches. These 300 men surrounded the enemy camp, and at the precise moment, they all lit their torches, giving the enemy the impression that they were being attacked not by 300 men, but by 300 divisions. Midian's army panicked, and turned their swords on each other. God turned this dark and stormy night into Israel's greatest military victory in their history! Christian, don't worry about the odds. We too-easily focus on the dark and stormy nights of our lives' problems and think we face overwhelming odds. Your predicaments are going to seem insurmountable if you believe that you have to deal with them yourself. But that isn't how the Lord designed things for Christians. He has worked it out so that we are like that judge Gideon. We don't fix the problems: we simply flick on the Lord's light and watch him deal with them in his stunning, miraculous way.

How bright is the light that shines in your life this morning? Jesus has broken or shattered the yoke that burdens you, and the bar across your shoulders. Imagine a pail filled with water, and another of equal weight, with a bar across your shoulders. There are days when the burdens you carry seem like a heavy weight, a load full of stones, almost breaking you down and sending you to your knees. Have you ever carried a heavy load of sin, guilt and shame? Have you ever carried a heavy burden of worry for someone you love, messed up by drugs and alcohol, overcome with illness, not close to the Lord and his love? Have you ever carried a burden of not being all that you can be for the Lord? My dear Christians, rejoice. Rejoice with the people of Galilee, living in the land of darkness. Your light has come. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest. My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Remember when you toured a cave years ago, how they turned off all the lights at one point of the tour. Remember that panic moment when you could see nothing. Then the lights came back on again. That's what our life once was, but now a great light has come. In this cave that we live, this cave we call our life on this earth, the light has come and with our eyes of faith we can see all the blessings Christ has given us. Rejoice People! We have seen the Light! Amen.