John is in jail and Jesus is on the run. This week’s gospel opens up like a western movie. Back then, preaching peace and living love could be a very dangerous business. In fact, it still can be. Jesus seems to know his ministry will take him to the cross, but he’s not quite ready for that yet. He’s just begun and there is so much work to do. Herod has John behind bars, but that doesn’t shut him up. From the depths of the dungeon, John cries out: “Repent,” echoing Christ’s call to: 

*Repent, for God’s dominion is at hand.* A modern and more accurate translation would be: *Turn around, change directions, and you’ll find God.*

Jesus and John are both on-message together. But all in all, it doesn’t look like an ideal time to start a ministry, and certainly not the ideal place for it. But the divine call is to be light to the world. Northern Galilee is definitely not where “the beautiful people” were: nothing but fishermen, and poor ones at that. But Jesus is preaching out in the boondocks for a reason, the very same reason that he was born in Bethlehem. The light did not come to the elite and powerful, the light came to those who needed it the most. And, as Isaiah had predicted, this backwater is where the light would come to: *the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*

The darkness in Northern Galilee was largely a function of isolation. They were way out of the mainstream, eking out a subsistence living. Jerusalem was where the action was, where the priests held sway, where theology was the constant topic of the day. In Northern Galilee, their focus was on empty nets and trying to fill them with fish. They lived in the darkness of bare, solitary subsistence. John and Jesus knew that this community needed light. They needed to know that in their darkness, God loved them, and they way Jesus and the apostles showed them God’s love, was to show them theirs.

The darkness we walk in today is the mirror opposite. We’re not isolated, we’re inundated.

Our darkness is a function of poorly distributed prosperity and the envy and self-indulgence it breeds. It is compounded by constant media intrusion and message overload. Our dark isolation is a defense mechanism developed by a people
drowning in a non-stop information dump. In the familiar code of texting, we are challenged with TMI: “too much information.” Personally, I can deal with it, but what’s more disturbing to me than TMI is the accompanying incivility that is modeled—if not glorified—on TV and social media. We watch reality TV, and we somehow think it’s acceptable to imitate that heinous behavior in our daily lives. We have disconnected the light, the humanity from the receiving end of our tweets and Facebook posts, and our emails. People say things in emails they’d never say face to face. We unleash on our keyboards with little thought of perceived tone of the message we’re sending, or how hurtful our words can be when they reach the person on the other side. Even within our congregation, there have been email exchanges that an outsider would be shocked to learn were between church members doing God’s work. And our own incivility sometimes creeps into the way we speak to each other.

We can do better. We can be more respectful, more loving, more nurturing and supportive of one another in our mutual ministry. We can bring more light.

*Turn around, change directions, and you’ll find God.*

Our mission as a church is to be a compassionate presence, to love and serve others, to repair the world. Particularly now in our political climate where so many people feel unsafe. We—this congregation—we need to be a refuge, a safe harbor. Like Jesus in Galilee, we know that our community needs light. Our community needs to know that in their darkness, God loves them, and they way we show them God’s love, is to show them ours. It seems like an insurmountable task, but we can do it if we treat each other better here than we’re treated anywhere else. One of our three goals as a congregation is to increase our membership, and, as you can see from the annual report, this is happening, but we have to be a place where people want to be, and that means treating each other better here than we’re treated anywhere else. That means radiating divine light in everything we do—every conversation, every email, every meeting, every time.

*Turn around, change directions, and you’ll find God.* The message is two-thousand years old; but it’s as if Jesus had composed it this morning just for us. God’s dominion is certainly at hand. But you won’t find it on Google Earth. God’s dominion exists where God is praised; where neighbor is honored and loved; where we light the world with our acts of justice and mercy. For the faithful, God’s dominion exists wherever divine intention reigns: in a single soul, in a family, a congregation, a community. But that great blessing comes with a great obligation. We are the light of the world. We must take that light to the people who walk in darkness, who need to know that they are loved by God and loved by us. We come to church to practice getting it right, and to carry the light into our week… to our family, our friends, our neighbors, our coworkers—we even have to be light to those we really don’t like.
Radiating divine light—bringing your best self to every day, this is being the light of the world. By treating each other with love and respect, everyone will know from our example that God’s dominion is indeed at hand, that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is here for the asking.

There is no reason to walk in darkness when we can dance in the light. We are the light of the world. Let us walk in the light.

Isaiah 9:1-4: But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Matthew 4:12-23: Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.