

## Threads of Light

Matthew 4:12-23

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
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Most days, Dave and I begin the morning with a series of Celtic morning prayers. I especially like Friday's prayer. Will you join me in prayer?

*In the morning light, O God,  
May I glimpse again your image deep within me  
The threads of eternal glory  
Woven into the fabric of every man and woman...  
And in glimpsing these threads of light  
Amidst the weakness and distortions of my life  
Let me be recalled  
To the strength and beauty deep in my soul.  
Let me be recalled  
To the strength and beauty of your image in every living soul.*  
(Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer, J. Philip Newell)

Most days, I don't see them, those threads of light. Much better at seeing those weaknesses and distortions of my life.

What about you? Do you see the Light?

"Light" is the image, the metaphor, for Jesus that Matthew uses in today's reading:

*"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."  
(Matthew 4:16)*

Jesus is the Light in the darkness.  
Jesus is the sun that rises in the dark country of death.

What about you? Do you see the Light?

Several years ago I was skiing at Whistler. The man next to me on the chairlift asked, "Does it ever get nice out here?" "What do you mean?", I replied. "This is a beautiful Northwest day! Just those beautiful gray clouds overhead. It is not raining. And if you look way out there on the horizon you can see a bit of light breaking through the clouds." The man looked at me, utterly perplexed. "Next year", he said, "I am going to Colorado!"

I have heard that it is easier to see the Light in Colorado.  
You have to look for the Light out here in the Northwest.

What about you? Do you see the Light?

Simon and Andrew, James and John are mending their nets. Minding their business. Not looking for a new life. Doing what is useful and important. No obvious vacuum or need in their lives. And Jesus sees them. He speaks to them. He says, "Come, Follow me." And they drop their nets and follow him.

How do we become followers of Jesus?

Do we admire Jesus? Think, "Here is someone I can look up to. I will follow him."

Do we think about it? Consider, "He has some good principles, good ideas to follow. He might go a little far at times...but I will follow him."

All that may be true.

But for Matthew it all comes down to this: Disciples see the Light.

Jesus appears, disruptively, inconveniently in our midst. Calls us not to admire him or accept his principles. Not even to accept him as our personal Lord and Savior.  
But to follow him.

By the power of Jesus' word, we become disciples.

Jesus speaks and his word generates "faith".

We trust him. We believe him. We say "Yes".

We see the Light and we follow.

Let's be honest. This is terrifying to most of us, most of the time. Now I am sure that there are some even sitting here today who are ready to say, "Mom! I hear Jesus calling me! I've got to leave and now!"

But for most of us, if we are honest we would rather not see the Light. Not meet and hear this Jesus if he is going to take me away from my life, my work, my family, my friends, my loved ones, my children, my job security, my dental plan.

Let there be no doubt: Jesus' word can and might call you out and away from life as you know it. He has done that for some of us here today – called us out, changed our lives, in ways we never could have imagined. Let there be no doubt: this Christian life of seeking the Light is risky and dangerous business. Jesus just might change your life.

Three and a half years ago our church was looking for a new youth minister. All of the clergy had been asked if we were interested in this position. All of us said, "No." I for one had been a youth minister 18 years ago. It was a miserable experience. I said that I would never do that again.

We had come up with a plan to find a new youth minister. I was feeling rather smug after a church council meeting one night and said to Catherine, "Now they will just have to accept our plan to find a new youth minister."

Catherine looked at me and said, "Yes. Unless you become the new youth minister."

I rolled my eyes and went home to bed.

I woke up the next morning totally excited about being a youth minister.

Where did this come from?!

Who was this person I had become?!

What was going on?!

I went to church and shared my excitement with my colleagues and members of the youth minister search committee.

They all looked at me and said, "You?! Really? Are you sure?"

They did a wise thing. They invited me to take some time to listen to whether this really was a call from Jesus. They invited themselves to take some time to listen whether this really was a call from Jesus to our church. They invited us to take some time together to listen to what we had discerned.

Whether or not Jesus will call you specifically out of life as you know it, this I am certain of for all of us: Jesus will call you deeper into your life. What the Celtic Christians call, "The strength and beauty deep in your soul. The strength and beauty of God's image deep in every living soul."

Jesus will call you deeper into your life and God's strength and beauty in you.

That's when you know if it is Jesus: if you are being called into the strength and beauty deep in your soul, to see the strength and beauty deep in every living soul.

I want to see the Light.

I want to be recalled to the strength and beauty deep in my soul.

And I believe you do too.

I have learned a bit over the years about what it means to see the Light:

When I was in seminary I was applying for positions to work as a chaplain. I interviewed at New Hampshire State Hospital, the state psychiatric hospital. After touring the grounds I told the supervisor, "This place terrifies me. I can't imagine working here." She looked me right in the eye and said, "Peter, then maybe this is exactly where you need to work."

She was right. It was amazing, life-changing experience for me. I fell in love with those people. I learned so much, especially about myself.

Ever since then I have tried to pay close attention to my fears for in them I seek to discern if this is Jesus calling me out of my fears and into a new life. I have tried to pay close attention to my tears as well. For in them I have heard Jesus calling me too.

I also try to remind myself that what I know for certain is the business at hand may very well not be the real business at hand. This is hard for me to remember. I get so focused on doing this thing knowing this is the most important thing to be doing. I need to remind myself again and again to look up and look around. For Jesus I have learned is always there showing up in the interruptions. There at my office door when I am so focused on what I think is most important. There he is again. There on the street when I am so focused on getting on to my next appointment. There is Jesus calling me, reaching out to me. I have become over the years more open to surprise, wonder, flexibility with myself.

I seek to be a better listener. I really work at that. For Jesus often speaks I have found through other people in my life. Sometimes, and maybe especially, through those people who say things that I just don't want to hear. Is that you Jesus speaking to me?

I listen carefully to those who really care about me, about my soul. Even when they say bizarre things like: "You would make a good minister." "Come do this act of civil disobedience with us." "You might consider a Zen retreat." "You should consider psychoanalysis." "You can tell me the truth."

Finally, I take time each day to practice listening to my soul. I depend on doing that practice of sitting and listening every day to my soul.

Why do I do these things? I want to be recalled to my soul. I want to be a follower of Jesus. I want to live in the Light. And I am just a better human being, better to be around, when I am recalled to the strength and beauty of God's image in my soul and aware that it is in your soul as well.

Last week Catherine quoted Sister Helen Prejan, "I watch what I do to see what I really believe."

Next week, John Dominic Crossan is going to call us to pay attention to the social and political context of our lives. He has just written a new book, "God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome Then and Now". "Then" – I think he means the Roman Empire. "Now" – I think he means us. Jesus, Crossan will share with us, is always calling us out of our lives and deeper into our lives to a different way Jesus calls a "Kingdom" way – a way of love and justice, nonviolence and non-retaliation, community and life together." Will we come expectant, open to being changed? Will we come waiting to hearing Jesus calling to us?

This week, we are called to see the Light.

Do you not see it? "The threads of light recalling you to the strength and beauty deep in your soul. The strength and beauty of God's image in every living soul." Amen.