

Isaiah 9:1–4; Psalm 27:1, 4–9; 1 Corinthians 1:10–18; Matthew 4:12–23 (NIV)

OPENER: THE JOKE THAT TRAINS OUR INSTINCTS

Prayer: Lord, Quiet our hearts, cleanse us with mercy, and form us in holy love. Speak, Lord. We are listening. Amen.

...

Friends, I want to start with something ordinary, because sometimes culture changes in ordinary ways. Sometimes culture doesn't change because somebody stands up and argues; sometimes it changes because we laugh at the same joke a thousand times until the joke becomes our instinct, a part of us....

There's a series of commercials from **Progressive**, you know the ones with "Dr. Rick." They started out as harmless satire, as character comedy and honestly, some of them were funny. But the longer they run, the more the punchline keeps circling the same target: **don't be that person**. Don't fill the silence. Don't talk to strangers. Don't offer help. Don't be... What? Midwestern?

And I'm not here to scold an insurance company. I'm here to name what repeated satire can do: it can quietly train a community to treat kindness like a flaw, and suspicion like wisdom.

When I've traveled either for military, work or with Debbie, I've felt the contrast. In parts of the East Coast (Middle to Upper), I'd say hello and get back a gruff, defensive, "Do I know you?" And on the West Coast, you could feel it: people will suddenly clutch their purse or check pockets for their billfold; like friendliness must have an angle.

Friends, I don't want us to lose what makes our communities strong (spent too much time on this... look at Addendum).

One of the gifts of the Midwest is simple **human recognition**: a nod, a wave, a "hi," a door held open for others, small kindness with no agenda. Not naïve. Not unsafe. Just decent.

And here's why I'm starting here: today's Scriptures say **light comes into darkness**—not after everything is cleaned up, but right into the shadow. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light (Isaiah 9:2, NIV)." Matthew says that light shows up first in **Galilee**—a real place, a mixed place, an overlooked place. "The people living in darkness have seen a great light (Matthew 4:16, NIV)."

So, here's the question for us today: **when the Light comes near, will we keep living guarded—or will we follow Jesus into a new way of life?**

OPENING: LIGHT IN GALILEE

Today the message is in four movements; we are going to see how the Holy Moves...

1. **Light in the dark place.**
2. **"One thing" as our center.**
3. **The cross that guards our unity.**
4. **The call to follow Jesus into a holy life together.**

INTRODUCTION, MOVE 1:

Light doesn't wait for ideal conditions (Isaiah 9:1–4; Matthew 4:12–16)

In the Book of Isaiah chapter 9, he points to a very specific region: Zebulun and Naphtali, in lower Galilee. That's not a geography lesson; it's a theological statement: God begins where people least expect.

Isaiah doesn't describe a mildly inconvenient moment; he names “**darkness.**” He names it “**deep darkness.**” And then he dares to say the thing we don't naturally say when the world feels heavy: **light has dawned.**

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light ... On those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:2, NIV).

That means Scripture is not embarrassed to name what you might be carrying right now: *exhaustion, fear, loneliness, grief, financial strain, chronic pain, a stressed marriage, a strained relationship with a child, a family system that keeps pulling you into old patterns, a church system that feels tense or tired.* **The Bible doesn't minimize it. It calls it what it is: darkness.**

But Isaiah also refuses to let darkness be the final narrator of your story.

Then Isaiah says something even stronger: this light **is not** just a feeling; it isn't a just a feeling... it's a breaking of burdens.

“As in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them ... The bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken” (Isaiah 9:4, NIV).

In other words: God doesn't only comfort; God delivers. God doesn't only inspire; God liberates.

Holiness begins here... not as religious polish, not as a “do or don't do” list, not as “clean yourself up,” not as a new personality. The Holy God tells us to be “**Be Holy,**” begins as God's rescue and God's re-centering presence.¹

And then Matthew opens the gospel and says: that prophecy is not an idea floating in the air. It happened in a place. Jesus goes to **Galilee**. He settles in **Capernaum**. He begins right there. And Matthew says it's, reminding them Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled: “The people living in darkness have seen a great light” (Matthew 4:16, NIV).

Friends, if you can't get any farther than this today, get this far: **Jesus does not wait for ideal conditions to meet people.** He goes where the shadow is thick.

So, the question becomes: when that light comes near, what kind of people does it make us?

Yep. Isaiah tells us light arrives in **the** dark place. Psalm 27 tells us how to live when fear still rises in our bodies and in our community.

¹ “Be holy” Leviticus 11:44, 19:2, 20:7, 20:26; 1 Peter 1:15-16 and “Be perfect” Matthew 5:48 (NIV).

MAIN POINT: MOVE 2

“One thing” becomes our center (Psalm 27:1, 4–9)... In Psalm 27, it begins with an anchoring confession:

“The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear ... The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid” (Psalm 27:1, NIV).

This is not the psalmist pretending there’s nothing to fear. This is the psalmist refusing to let fear become our lord.

Now we come to one of the most clarifying lines in Scripture:

“One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life” ... “To gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple” (Psalm 27:4, NIV).

That kind of cuts to the heart of the matter, huh. “One thing.” Not ten things. Not a life scattered into a thousand fragments. Not discipleship reduced to reaction.

This is where our Friends instincts make deep sense. We are **a people** learning how to be **gathered**, how to be **centered**, how to quiet ourselves enough to listen, **and then obey**.

Thomas R. Kelly described an inwardly gathered life—moving from the surface to the Center, where obedience becomes love.²

And yes, people try to label him and his writing in modern terms, but Kelly doesn’t belong to our sorting machines. He belongs to the testimony of a seeker who found. He listened, he opened the door to Christ’s knock, and he wrote with a depth I can’t imitate—only receive.

That’s Psalm 27: **one thing I seek**. And that one thing stabilizes not just individuals, but whole meetings.

Family Systems language helps us name what destabilizes us: when anxiety rises, people become reactive, communication goes indirect, and triangles multiply. Friedman’s leadership application is simple: the best gift a leader can offer an anxious system is a steady, non-anxious presence. And the best gift a church can offer an anxious culture is a steady, Christ-centered presence.³

Psalm 27 trains that steadiness.

“My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’ ... Your face, LORD, I will seek (Psalm 27:8, NIV).”

That is a center you can put into practice. And once a people have a center, they can be warm without being foolish, open without being naïve, friendly without being performative, courageous without being combative. They can offer recognition to others because they are not starving for recognition themselves.

But even centered people face a major threat: not only the **darkness** “out there,” but **division** “in here.” That’s why Paul’s word in 1 Corinthians is so direct.

² Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: HarperOne, 1941).

³ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007).

TAKE AWAY, MOVE 3

The cross exposes our favorite church sins: factions and “branding” (1 Corinthians 1:10–18)...

Paul writes to a gifted church, they are *active, spiritual, resourced* and he says: **you are in danger of losing the gospel’s shape.**

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say ... And that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10, NIV).

Then Paul names what’s actually happening: quarrels, party spirit, spiritual slogans. *“One says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I follow Christ’”* (1 Corinthians 1:12, NIV).

And then Paul asks a question that should make a church stop and examine itself:

“Is Christ divided...[?]” (1 Corinthians 1:13, NIV).

In other words: when we turn church into clichés or individual “these are my people,” we lie about Jesus. When we turn the body of Christ into tribes, we preach a distorted gospel with our **relational life**... even if our words are orthodox.

Now let’s be honest: division doesn’t always wear ugly clothes. Sometimes it wears the clothes of “discernment.” Sometimes it wears the clothes of “conviction.” Sometimes it wears the clothes of “I’m just being truthful.” But Paul cuts through that by taking us back to the cross.

“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence ... Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Corinthians 1:17, NIV).

Then he says this:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing ... But to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18, NIV).

Friends, the cross is not only the doorway into Christian life; it is the ongoing pattern of Christian life. The cross keeps leveling pride. The cross keeps breaking our addiction to winning... our need of control. The cross keeps exposing our desire to be right more than we desire to be loving.

John MacArthur, coming from a very different tradition than Friends, presses a point that still matters here: divisions in the church aren’t merely social problems; they are theological problems because they distort the witness of Christ and the power of the gospel.⁴

And in our Friends tradition, unity has never been meant as mere niceness or social harmony. Unity is meant to be the fruit of a people living under the leadership of Jesus.

⁴ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1984).

Carole Dale Spencer is right to keep insisting that holiness is not a side topic for Friends, it's the soul of the tradition: a community formed by Christ's life into a shared life of obedience.⁵ That shared life is how we bear a credible witness.

And if we want a very practical way to say it: the cross trains a community to stop "branding" themselves with leaders, slogans, and camps, and instead to become a people who can yield, repent, forgive, and obey together.

Brené Brown has helped many people name that real courage isn't posturing; it's the willingness to be honest, to be accountable, to do the hard relational work without armor.⁶ Friends, unity requires that kind of courage—because unity means we don't take the easy route of contempt. We do the costly work of love.

So if the cross guards our unity, what does Jesus do next? He calls. And his call forms a people who carry the light.

CONCLUDING, MOVE 4

The Light calls, and the call forms a holy people (Matthew 4:17–23)

Matthew tells us Jesus begins with one clear proclamation:

"From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matthew 4:17, NIV).

Repentance is not humiliation. Repentance is reorientation. It is turning from false centers to the true Center. It's leaving the darkness, not because you were **shamed**, but because you've seen the light.

Then Jesus calls disciples with a sentence that changes lives:

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people" (Matthew 4:19, NIV).

And this is what Matthew (one of the people, there, who was witnessed it) says their response was: *"At once they left their nets and followed him"* (Matthew 4:20, NIV).

Friends, notice the sequence: **light** → **call** → **obedience** → **formation** → **mission**.

Jesus doesn't merely offer information. He forms a people.

He calls ordinary workers, you and me, and gives us a new vocation. He takes what our hands know and turns it toward the kingdom. And then Matthew summarizes Jesus' ministry in a way that is both simple and overwhelming:

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues..."

"Proclaiming the good news of the kingdom..."

"And healing every disease and sickness among the people..." (Matthew 4:23, NIV).

That's the light:

⁵ Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007).

⁶ Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts* (New York: Random House, 2018).

- **Teaching** — truth that reforms the mind.
- **Proclaiming** — gospel that recenters the heart.
- **Healing** — mercy that restores lives and communities.

N. T. Wright has long emphasized that when Jesus announces the kingdom, he is declaring God's reign arriving in and through his own presence and work: God's rule breaking into the real world, not as a distant theory, but as active renewal.⁷ That's what this is all about: the reign of God showing up **in a place of shadow**.

And Friends, this is where our tradition has a gift to offer the wider church: we are not only a **people** of religious talk; we are called to be a **people of holy responsiveness**: listening, obeying, and being formed together.

D. Elton Trueblood never lets the church forget that **discipleship must become public witness**: the inward life with Christ is meant to overflow into outward faithfulness in the world.⁸ Jesus doesn't call disciples to withdraw from human need; he calls them into a life that carries light into the places people have stopped expecting light.

And faithful presence helps us say it plainly: Christianity is not merely remembering Jesus; it is meeting the living Christ, being addressed, guided, corrected, healed, and sent by him.⁹ That's the heartbeat of this text: **Jesus comes near, speaks, calls, and forms**.

So when we ask, "How do we keep Midwestern friendliness from being eroded?"—we can answer in an even deeper way: we don't merely preserve a regional trait; we receive and practice a gospel-formed way of life. We become a **people** whose warmth isn't just personality: it's holiness. It's the love of Christ embodied in ordinary human recognition.

CONCLUSION — FOUR RESPONSES FOR A HOLY WEEK

Friends, here is the invitation of today: **Light has come near**.

So this week, I want to give you a few simple responses: practices small enough to do, and deep enough to shape you.

1) Name your darkness without fear: Scripture is not afraid of your truth. "On those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2, NIV).

2) Choose the "one thing" that re-centers you:

Five minutes a day this week. No fixing. No performing.

"My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!' Your face, LORD, I will seek." (Psalm 27:8, NIV).

3) Refuse the pull of the world: Stop feeding triangles. Speak directly. Pray first. Stay humble. "Is Christ divided" (1 Corinthians 1:13, NIV).

4) Take one concrete step of obedience: follow.

Jesus is still saying it: "'Come, follow me,' Jesus said" (Matthew 4:19, NIV).

⁷ N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

⁸ D. Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

⁹ Paul N. Anderson, *A Theology of Presence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).

So what is one “net” you need to set down this week? Is it a habit, a resentment, a fear-driven pattern, or a distraction?

Friends, Jesus is not only the Light we admire. He is the Light we follow.

And when we follow, he forms a people whose life becomes a testimony: the light has come, and the darkness is not the end.

Amen.

ADDENDUM: MIDWESTERN CHARACTER AND CULTURE.

Quick recognition

- Make brief eye contact and give a small nod or smile
- Say “Good morning,” “Hey there,” or “How’s it going?”
- Offer a simple “Take care” or “Have a good one” when you part

Small helps in public spaces

- Let someone merge in traffic/leave space at a busy turn
- Use a “courtesy wave” when someone lets you in
- Return a cart for someone (or take an extra cart back)
- Pick up something someone dropped and hand it back
- Hold an elevator and say, “Go ahead”
- Step aside so someone with fewer items can go first
- If someone looks lost, ask, “Are you finding everything okay?” (and accept “no” quickly)

“Make the day easier” gestures

- Give up your seat when it’s clearly needed
- Offer your umbrella at a doorway for a moment
- Point out something helpful without shaming: “Your lights are off,” “Your gas cap is open,” “You dropped this”
- Leave a small gap so a parent with a stroller can pass

- Keep your cart close so aisles stay open

Encouragement that isn’t personal

- Compliment something (this is safer than body comments):
 - “That’s a great jacket.”
 - “I like your shoes.”
 - “That’s a good playlist you’ve got going.”
- Thank workers by name if they have a badge: “Thanks, Maria.”
- Say “I appreciate you” to cashiers, nurses, custodians, delivery drivers

Kindness when things get tense

- In a line: “No rush, you’re fine.”
- In traffic: give a little patience
- If someone makes a mistake: offer grace instead of commentary
- If you bump someone: “I’m sorry, are you okay?” and keep moving

Quiet generosity (only if it feels safe)

- Pay for the coffee of a person behind you (no note, no speech)
- Leave a bigger tip when you can
- Offer bottled water on a hot day if you’re at an event

A good “Friends” practice

- Treat strangers as **not invisible**: a glance, a nod, a simple greeting, then let them be
- Offer help once, and if they decline, say “Of course” and release it (no pressure)