

My friends in Christ, in today's Scripture text from the Prophet Isaiah, we are told that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...[and] upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone." And this was prophesied to happen in a region of the Holy Land called the district of Zebulun and Naphtali; and this prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus left His home of Nazareth and "withdrew to Galilee," in the north of the Holy Land, which in that region was the historical homestead of the Tribes Zebulun and Naphtali.... Jesus *is* the light.

Consider light, as such, for just a moment. I wonder if any of us have ever found ourselves in complete and total darkness – *so* dark that, even allowing for our eyes to adjust (and, *hopefully*, we can catch even just a mere *glimpse*, a mere *silhouette*, of *something*)...*so* dark that, even *then*, we can see *nothing* at all. Have any of us ever been trapped in darkness *that* absolute? Down in the lower level of the parish office, there is a room that has the control panel for the HVAC system of the church building, but to get to that room, there is a long concrete hallway connecting the lower level to the control room, and a door at either end. If it is night, and if the lights are off, that hallway is to me the closest that I have ever come to experiencing complete and total darkness. It is *so* dark in that space that the darkness *itself* almost begins to *feel* substantial – like a cold and heavy quilt suddenly dropped on me. But darkness is *not* a thing; it is *literally* a *nothing* (a *no-thing*), because what defines darkness is the absence of light, and light *is* a thing. And so, for darkness to be so intense that it actually begins to *feel* like a substantial *thing*...*that* is some *very* intense darkness indeed!

But then...if there is even just one, tiny pin-point of light (the spark of a small matchstick is all it takes)...then the darkness is defeated.... It takes *all* of the darkness to snuff out the light...but it takes only the smallest pin-point of light...and darkness is vanquished.

Jesus was just one man, one man of *millions* who lived in the world in His time...a one-man invasion of the *Fortress Satana* that the devil had conquered and fortified, beginning with his duping our first parents and bringing about the Fall...a one-man rescue mission to save us from the devil's tyranny of sin and death. But what could one man do against such reckless hate, such an onslaught of death, one tiny pin-point of light utterly surrounded on all sides by the devil's suffocating shroud

of darkness? (...I am reminded suddenly of the “Tank Man” from the Tiananmen Square massacre in China in 1989: one man stood in front of a parade of tanks...and *stopped* them...)

Well, Jesus of course knew what He was about. He knew of course the phenomenal cosmic power of even the smallest of lights. Like that single spark of fire that starts the fuse in the opening credits of every *Mission: Impossible* movie, that single spark starts the fuse...and that fuse triggers the explosion.... Christ is the spark. And in our Gospel text from Saint Matthew, we find out what (or, rather, *who*) is the start of that fuse: the first four Apostles, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

But how did *that*...how did Jesus calling those four guys to become “fishers of men” lead to a veritable “Cambrian explosion” of an on-fire Catholic Christian faith throughout the whole of the Roman Empire – throughout the whole *world*? Well, *how* that all happened has to do with small (yet intentionally-planned and carefully-executed) beginnings; and because we are talking about the *Lord* here...*ultimately*, it has to do with one’s *friendship* with Jesus...Divine Intimacy.

Jesus called those four unto Himself, and then He called eight more to complete His chosen number of twelve (to match the Twelve Tribes of Israel, you see) – and there were also a few others who tagged along with them, including the women who supported His ministry and mission out of their own means, their own income, as the Gospel tells us.... Basically, He circled up with a few of His chosen friends, and then He went camping with them for three years.

And *that*...was *it*! No meticulously-crafted program, no advertising campaign, no structures in place to help them on mission (no parish buildings, parochial schools, or chanceries downtown).

No, no – *none* of that. He just circled up with a few of His chosen friends...and went hiking through the countryside, camping wherever they stopped for the night...for three years.

In *other* words: His chosen friends *spoke* with Him, *listened* to Him, and they *even* laughed and cried with Him. In short, they shared life with Him. Like babies and toddlers who spend almost *all* of their time with their moms and dads, and thus quickly start to pick up on and imitate their habits, their ways of speaking, their mannerisms (for better or for worse, huh?)...just so, the Apostles went hiking and camping with Jesus – shared *life* with Jesus – almost all of *their* time, and for a *long* time.

They followed Him so closely on the dusty roads of Galilee that they were literally caked in the dust of the Rabbi; and *Jesus* spent so much of *His* time, *likewise*, with *them* that He certainly *must* have begun to take on the smell of His sheep (as Pope Francis would say).

But I keep saying it, and I say it again: this Divine Intimacy with Jesus Christ – this *constant* opportunity for *constant* encounter with Him – it is *not* only for the elite and privileged few, but it is for *all* of *us*. Sure, *they* got to speak with Him and listen to Him just as *we* do one with another, but *we* get to be with Him and pray to Him in a still and quiet place here in the church, with Him right there in the tabernacle. And *we* get to *receive* Him in the Eucharist at Holy Communion – each and every single *day* if we want – whereas the Apostles did not get to have the Eucharist or even get to *know* about the Eucharist until near the very end, at the Last Supper.

And so, *how* we encounter Jesus certainly is *very* different, that is true, from how the *Apostles* got to encounter Him, but *that* we get to encounter Him nonetheless remains the same, and *that* we get to encounter Him is Divine Intimacy...personal friendship with Jesus. And as He did with the Apostles and the other disciples, so He does with *us*: He calls *us, too*, to be His chosen friends.

But Divine Intimacy...true and meaningful friendship of *any* kind and with *anyone* (Jesus or otherwise)...*that* is a two-way street. Jesus called Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John – and *how* did they *respond* to the High Call? “*At once*, they left their nets and followed Him...*immediately*, they left their boat and their father and followed Him.” Divine Intimacy...friendship with Jesus...that encounter with the Lord inspires and calls for swift and total *response*...and *they* responded thus.

How do *we* respond?

But perhaps that question of how do we respond is getting a bit too far ahead of ourselves, because before we can even begin to contemplate how *we* would respond to the High Call of Jesus Christ, *first* we need to know how we can even have an *encounter* with Him that we might then form our own personal *friendship* with Him...that we might *then* respond to His High Call.

And so, and to conclude: that theme of encounter. It is noteworthy that after much prayer and discernment, Bishop Daly has promulgated a simple and yet impactful renewal of our diocesan mission statement to help all of us be *singularly* focused on *why* we are here, *why* we are Catholic, *why*

we do what we do; check out the diocesan website and you will see: “Encounter...love...proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Eastern Washington.” Because it truly does begin with *encounter*; until one *encounters* Jesus Christ, then all of the catechesis, all of the programs, all of the liturgy, all of the music in all the world – *none* of it will matter. Social outreach without Jesus is reduced to the work of your run-of-the-mill NGO; liturgy without Jesus may as well be just another one-person play at the Spokane Civic Theater; music without Jesus is a concert.... That *encounter...is everything*.

So *how* to find and experience that encounter? Three ways. The first is easy; we are already here – the Mass. But *really*, the *Eucharist*. And so, somewhat of an extension of the Mass is what is called “Eucharistic Adoration.” Not *necessarily* a Holy Hour – which I suspect is what many people imagine when they hear words like “Eucharistic Adoration.” It could be a *half-hour*. It could even be five minutes. But it is personal, private prayer *to* Jesus and *with* Jesus as He is present to us, *truly* present, in the Real Presence of the Eucharist. Here at Saint Mary, we have many opportunities in any given month for Eucharistic Adoration here in the church (see the parish website or the parish bulletin for details), and whether you attend the *entire* hour or, again, just five minutes...there is an encounter with Jesus waiting there for you. And in addition to these *scheduled* times for Adoration here in the church, we have our very own round-the-clock Adoration Chapel, unlocked from 7:30 AM to 10 PM, and there is even a keypad code to gain access to the Chapel after hours.... And as far as I know, ours is the *only* parish with such a Chapel in the entire Diocese.

“But Father,” our youth group kids would retort, “what do I *do* for five minutes?” Another easy one: pray. Just pray, baby! If you stop by to visit Jesus in the Adoration Chapel after work or after school, complain to Him in your heart whatever frustrations you were made to suffer that day and then ask Jesus for an answer, or for clarity, or even simply for peace.... Craig Swapp tells us all over the place, “One call, that’s all.” Well, what *I* say unto you is *this*, “Just five minutes with Jesus in Adoration...that’s all.” Not as quippy, I admit! But still, it works!

Second way for an encounter with Jesus: go to confession. Here at Saint Mary, we have *lots* of opportunity for confession, at *least* as much as any *other* parish in the metro area. Father Mike on Wednesdays, myself on Fridays and Saturdays – and also *both* of us are making appointments all the

time for spiritual direction and to hear confessions. And I cannot tell you (I *literally* cannot tell you, because of the Seal of Confession!) how frequently it seems to happen that as soon as a penitent is praying the Act of Contrition, the tears start the flow.... If *that* is not an encounter with Jesus, the Divine Physician, then I have no idea what *is*.

And third and finally: the Bible. Saint Jerome says that “ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” How can we *possibly* claim to know Jesus and therefore have a friendship with Him if we do not even take up the Bible and read it?

Today, the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, has been designated “Word of God Sunday” by Pope Francis, which he did just a few years ago, a Sunday *particularly* set apart in order to emphasize and celebrate the gift to us from God that *is* Sacred Scripture. Well, Jesus *is* the Word of God. He is the Word made flesh Who dwelt among us, as Saint John testifies in the introductory passage of His Gospel account.

We *need* to be soaked in Scripture if we are to be caked in the dust of the Rabbi. We *need* to know the *Bible* if we are to know *Jesus*.

Divine Intimacy...friendship with Jesus...begins when we experience an encounter with the Lord...and the best opportunities available to us to experience that encounter is in the Eucharist, in the confessional, and in the Bible. And just as that tiny pin-point of light conquers the all-pervasive darkness...so, too, will these small ways of experiencing an encounter with Jesus scatter whatever is cold and dark in your lives and thus envelop you in the warmth of His light.... May it be, then, that we will seek an encounter with Jesus...that we may then *live* the Gospel in our lives and *proclaim* the Gospel to the world...for the salvation of souls and for the glory of God.