

Matthew 4:12-23

12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ ‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶ 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.’

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

18 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 lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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.

²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

23 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.

FOLLOW ME

My favorite uncle, when I was a child, wasn’t even an uncle technically. Uncle Dale was the husband of one of my mom’s closest friends who I came to know as Aunt Andy (short for Andrea). Uncle Dale and Aunt Andy used to visit us a lot. And among the things that amazed me about Uncle Dale was his ability to pull a coin out from behind my ear. *I don’t know how he did it*, but his hand would reach to my ear, and there he’d find a quarter. But that wasn’t Uncle Dale’s only trick; Uncle Dale could untangle almost any knot that I managed to get in my fishing line. And Uncle Dale could smile through just about anything. If my brother or sister or I learned that Uncle Dale was coming, or Uncle Dale was going to take us fishing, or Uncle Dale was taking us to the park, we were thrilled. We looked forward to it.

In a sense you could say that Uncle Dale ministered to children, and I assume he enjoyed it (if he didn’t he sure had me fooled). His attitude was always upbeat. He never lost his patience, and he never lost his smile. And I would say that some of Uncle Dale has rubbed off on me. Yes, it’s probably true that every grown up makes goofy faces and talks funny around little children, but I allow the goofiness to linger until I know that a child has noticed me and reacted. Not everyone puts this much energy and concentration into their interactions with children.

And I don’t say this to boast, because I know that everyone has gifts that they excel in, and everyone has ministries that they are good at. But I say this because I responded to Uncle Dale differently based upon my own needs at the time. I think I was a very insecure child I think I needed a lot of attention, and I appreciated that Uncle Dale was spending a lot of quality time with me. I don’t know what prompted Uncle Dale to minister to children the way he did, or if he even knew that he was ministering to me in

such a way that I can stand here today and tell you about him. But it's clear that he affected me in a positive way, and so I want to emulate Uncle Dale in my dealings with children. I hoped that I would indeed follow Uncle Dale's example and be a source of joy for the children in my life, particularly those who may be going through hard times. Perhaps that is what prompted me to go into social work as a counselor at a group home where I worked with young children who were "wards of the state" due to the troubles they experienced in their homes. These were very lonely, frightened children who needed someone to be their friend, their advocate, their "Uncle Dale."

Our reading for today begins with Jesus heading up river after John's arrest and starting a ministry in Galilee, in the land of Zebulun and Naphali, a land of great darkness. These were people going through hard times. The land used to be part of Israel, but for over seven hundred years it had been under foreign rule. What's worse is that it had been ravaged and intentionally re-populated by people of various ethnicities in an effort to destabilize it, thus making it easier to control for the conquering empire. Though there was a substantial Jewish population in the land, they were looked down on by their fellow Jews in the south who lived close to the Temple in Jerusalem. But the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonian army in 587 B.C. had sent the people into further darkness, as now even their Jewish identity was threatened. The very home of their God, the God of Israel, had been destroyed, and as the prophet Ezekiel had explained it, God's presence had left the Temple. Yes, the people of Galilee were a people who lived in great darkness.

And out of this darkness came Jesus, teaching, preaching, and healing – though it would be more accurate to say that Jesus was providing therapy to the people (the word that our Bible translates "curing" is actually the Greek word *therapeuō* from which the word *therapy* is derived. Jesus was providing therapy to a lot of people, not just the physically sick but the spiritually sick as well. And so the prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled; those who were dwelling in darkness were seeing a great light. Jesus was to Galilee what Uncle Dale was to me. He brought joy and hope and healing with him.

And what of our world today? How can the messages of Jesus, the ministry of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus bring light to a dark world? The church is far more than a building that holds religious worship services; the church is a people empowered by the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus, that is, to take his ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing to the world at large. We follow in Jesus' footsteps the way I follow in my Uncle Dale's. I didn't take classes from Uncle Dale, but I learned from his example as the disciples learned from Jesus' example. We start off by watching Jesus, then we learn from him, and finally we go and do as he did, teaching God's ways, preaching the good news, and healing all who need healing. Just as Jesus "rubbed off" on his disciples so too the disciples rubbed off on other disciples and on and on down through the ages. Now it's our turn. Just as Uncle Dale rubbed off on me, Jesus has rubbed off on us as well, and we are to out to rub off on the world.

And the world needs Jesus as it never has before. Though we live in one of the wealthiest nations in the world, we have an epidemic of depression, substance abuse, and suicide. People have lost their direction, and the church can offer that to them. We live in expectation of God's kingdom coming on earth, and we are commissioned to build that kingdom one soul at a time. We take hope to the streets, knowing that God will ultimately exercise full authority in heaven and on earth, and that his kingdom will have no end. That hope gives us the strength to carry on our ministry despite any setbacks. We have a hope that is undefeatable, a joy that is indefatigable, and a love that comes from God himself. It's a hope and a joy and a love that has been passed down from generation to generation. It began with Jesus and it will once again end with Jesus, and in between we carry the good news and we offer ourselves to those who dwell in darkness that they may come to that light that is Jesus himself.

Today we minister love to this new family and welcome them to our family. We're not a perfect family; we have our problems like any family. But we're a family that strives to follow Jesus and help each other follow Jesus. We're a family that tries to be like Uncle Dale, joyful, caring, and patient with others. We welcome the Pietros in great joy and in great hope that as the younger generation they will carry the torch, the light that they will in turn pass down to others.