The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 9:1-4: “But there will be no gloom for her who was 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 has made 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 dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; You have increased its joy; they rejoice before You as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, You have broken as on the day of Midian.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. The Battles of Zebulun/Naphtali

Zebulun and Naphtali. Every nation has to have a Zebulun and a Naphtali, I suppose. Places like these serve a purpose, like...making the rest of the nation look better. They're a good place to be from, not live in—a place for hayseeds and riff-raff. Up there at the northern end of Israel, they're a filter of sorts: when Gentiles start to travel down into Israel, a lot of them stop in Zebulun and Naphtali and go no further south towards Judah. That's why the area is called "Galilee of the Gentiles," which isn't meant to be a compliment at all. If you want a nice seaside holiday, I'm thinking Joppa. If you want good schools or shopping, Jerusalem is a destination. If you want low-rent and some, er, “interesting” neighbors...well, there's Zebulun and Naphtali.

Sometimes they're not a filter, but a buffer. Usually when armies invade Israel, they do so from the north, beyond the Jordan River. Zebulun and Naphtali serve the purpose of absorbing the initial thrust of the spear: they take the hit and shed the blood while Jerusalem and parts south have a chance to build up their defenses.

Oh, every nation has to have a Zebulun and a Naphtali, but nothing big ever happens there.

Well, almost never. There was that time back in the book of Judges, the day of Midian. The Midianites had come a long way and ravaged the land of Israel: their army was immense and they stripped the land bare as they went. The people of Israel were dwelling in the darkness of occupation and starvation, and the Midianites showed no sign of leaving anytime soon. Their army was camped in the Valley of Jezreel, up in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

At the east end of that valley was an unremarkable little town called Ophrah, in which lived an unremarkable man named Gideon. He was the least of the house of his father Joash, and the family was least of the clans of the tribe of Manasseh, usually called the half-tribe of Manasseh. From this completely inauspicious start, the Lord called Gideon to raise up an army to deliver Israel. Gideon gathered a respectable force of 32,000 or so to go against the countless Midianites, to which the Lord said, "Too big!" By the time God was done, He'd whittled Gideon's army down to 300, so that all might know that the Lord was the cause of the victory.

The battle plan was as strange as the scrawny size of the army. Gideon gave to each man a torch, a jar and a trumpet. In the dark of night, they surrounded the Midianites in the hills above; and all at once, they broke their jars and waved their torches and sounded the trumpets. The Midianites dwelling in darkness saw a great number of lights; and assuming that each led a
large number of attackers, they panicked. In the darkness of the camp, they began to attack and kill one another, then flee. More Israelites joined in the chase after that, and it was a rout. Kings died and the Midianite forces were decimated. The rod of the oppressor was broken on the day of Midian. Israel was delivered: by a dinky army led by an unknown commander from a small town...from the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. With such an unremarkable cast of characters and so much human puniness tied to the victory, it was clear that the Lord had done the fighting for them.

That victory would be remembered, the story told again and again of that one shining moment for Galilee of the Gentiles. It’s the sort of thing that Gideon’s hometown might note on the “Welcome to Ophrah” sign. But it was significant because it was a one-time thing in the past; and such a wonder wouldn’t happen again. At least not there, right?

Wrong, declared Isaiah. Another battle would be fought there. The enemy would be far greater than the Midianites, for the people would be living in deep darkness, cowering in the shadow of death and all the rest of the consequences of sin. The victory would be even more decisive, delivering the people from sin and death to eternal life. In foretelling the fight, Isaiah declared, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”

This is all about Jesus. It’s fulfilled in the Savior. Isaiah made this prophecy and Gideon fought with torches to point toward the Christ, the Light of the World. In all that He does, He shines with grace and glory and life. In all that He does, He is defeating the darkness of sin and death.

You see a bit of the battle in today’s Gospel lesson, where Matthew makes it a point to quote our Old Testament text and say, “This is how Jesus fulfills Isaiah 9:1-4. This is how He fights and wins.” So how does He fight and win?

He starts to gather disciples in Capernaum, not all that far from Gideon’s hometown. Not 300, but twelve. They won’t be much help for a while. They’re not ready to fight yet, but to watch and listen and learn. If there’s anything remarkable about these first disciples, it’s that they’re totally unremarkable: if the Lord didn’t choose to call them as He once called Gideon, you’d never know about Simon, Andrew, James and John. They’re only remembered because the Lord remembers them.

What do these lowly disciples witness? How is this battle fought? Jesus goes from place to place, and He talks. He speaks. He tells everyone, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The kingdom of heaven is at hand because it’s the King who’s at hand, speaking. When He declares, “Repent,” He’s not just telling them to clean up their act. That’s part of it, but it goes way beyond that. For those in despair, He's telling them to stop thinking that there is no hope, and telling them to believe that He will save them. For those who are looking for some angle where they can outwit or outwork sin and save themselves, He's telling them to stop thinking that they can save themselves and to trust in Him instead. He's offering salvation, and here's the really good part: when He tells them to repent, He's not giving marching orders. He's giving repentance! He's fighting the fight and defeating sin by speaking of grace and faith in Him, and thus giving it to those who hear.

He doesn't just proclaim. He heals. People bring Him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and He heals them. Not some, but all. It's not like He has to pick carefully, that He can heal only certain sicknesses and cast out some demons. It's not even close. He simply heals everyone in need. How? The text doesn't say, but you know how He usually heals throughout the Gospels: it's by
speaking. His Word has the power to give healing from illness and deliverance from demons, which means it also has the power to give repentance and faith.

That's how the battle is fought: not just for a day, but far longer than that. It doesn't stay up in Zebulun and Naphtali either, but carries down to Jerusalem. It's fought with simple words like “Neither do I condemn you” or “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” or “Your faith has made you well.” The battle culminates and the war is won with words like “Father, forgive them” and “Today you will be with Me in Paradise” and “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”, and finally, “It is finished.” Those words at the cross don’t sound like a fight, but the useless utterances of a dying man. But the dying man is the King; and though His crown is made of thorns and His throne is the cross, this is where the victory is won by His death for the sins of the world.

The mop-up begins three days later, with the Word of the King spoken by one of His messengers: “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen.”

+++ "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.” The Christ comes, and the light shines in the darkness. Sin, death and devil are defeated as utterly as the day of Midian when Gideon and the 300 triumphed with torches and trumpets.

The Light shines forevermore. It scatters the darkness; and this is what you must remember: the Light shines by speaking.

II. So Let Your Light Shine

There are times in wars when the battles continue long after the outcome of the war is clear. I’m told that some of the bloodiest battles of World War II were fought on little islands in the Pacific after it was evident to the world that the Allies would triumph. However, if you were dug in on one of those little Pacific islands with the enemy still attacking at every opportunity, the victory might be hard to believe.

The battle to redeem all of creation has been won. Sin, death and devil have been defeated. And you? You’re on this little island where it seems that the fight is undecided, the enemy is winning and it is only getting darker.

So what are you to do? It’s getting tougher to raise kids. It’s becoming more unpopular to practice Christianity. Public morality is falling apart; with the anniversary of Roe v. Wade this past week, we remember with grief the death of 55 million unborn sacrificed mostly in the name of expediency. And if our nation follows the path of others, then it’s only a matter of time until God’s law on many issues will be considered hate speech—and thus no longer protected free speech. It’s a dark time. It seems the enemy is winning. What are you to do?

Jesus tells you in Matthew 5: “You are the light of the world.... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14a,16). So let your light shine. What is your light? Your light is Christ, who has shone upon you to deliver you from the darkness of sin and death. To let your light shine is to make Christ known.

How do you let Christ shine? By speaking—by speaking His Word. Where the Word is, the King—the Word made flesh—is present to save. Where the King is, the kingdom is. You speak the Law of God so that people hear about the darkness they’re living in, the murk they've
become so accustomed to that they think it can be no brighter. You speak the Gospel so that people hear of the King who has defeated darkness to bring them into the light. It’s by the Word of God that the kingdom of heaven spreads.

What are you to do? Speak to shine. Proclaim Christ, for Christ works through that Word to save. This Word gives eternal life, and nothing else does. What a privilege to proclaim light and life! What a joy to speak of Christ!

This, of course, means that the greatest temptation for Christians in particular, and the Church in general, is to stop speaking the Word. Christians will always tempted to believe that speaking of Christ is useless or a drudgery. They’ll always be tempted to see evangelism as a terrible chore to be shoved off on somebody else, not an opportunity to speak life. And, of course, Christians will always be tempted to change the message and turn to another agenda that seems more effective.

But only Christ has won the battle, and only Christ gives the victory by His means of grace. If the Church makes the message merely about morality instead of sin and grace, it will end up with sinners who act better but are still lost in their sin. If the Church adjusts its message to “love” by tolerating sin, it will end up with sinners who think that darkness is light and see no need for Christ’s sacrifice. If the Church turns from the Gospel to political activism, then it is working to reform a world that is passing away rather than proclaiming deliverance to a kingdom that will never pass away. Does that make love or morality or political participation bad? No, but it’s not the Gospel. It doesn’t shine the light of Christ. Someone will always talk morality or government, and as citizens you do what you can for country, as long as it’s in keeping with God’s Word: but if the Church stops proclaiming the Gospel, nobody else will. Does that mean that proclaiming the Gospel will be easy or visibly successful or protected by law? No, and in many parts of the world Christians are suffering persecution and death for the faith. But the only sword that Jesus gives to His Church for battle is the sword of His Spirit—His Word. That may not look like much: neither did a jar and a torch against the armies of Midian. But it is God’s Word, and it is still working to save when Christians speak it while being led to the gallows.

Do not be deceived or dismayed. Rejoice! Rejoice as farmers on the day of harvest, and as victors dividing the spoil. The war is won. By His death, Jesus destroyed the power of sin, death and devil utterly and completely. He has endured the darkness of cross and grave, even descended into hell, so that He might deliver you into His light forever. You were dwelling in darkness, but He has called you into His light in your baptism, clothing you with His righteousness. Things will look dark in this world because this is a world of darkness, but the King is here and you are part of His kingdom; and so you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen