

Jesus left Nazareth to live in Capernaum in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali as foretold by the Prophet Isaiah. If we flip the pages back in our bible back to the Prophet Isaiah, we find what was very disturbing news at the time.

Isaiah's prophecies began at a time of great crisis. The promised land of milk and honey was becoming barren and desolate. The Lord who has protected and watched over the chosen people will no longer turn a blind eye to their rejection of him. God will use the Assyrians from across the Euphrates River as his "razor" to inflict disgrace and suffering upon his people (Note Isa 7:20). It is not so much that God is punishing his people, rather, Judah has rejected the divine protection of God by seeking Assyrian support. When we place our trust in the godless rather than God, we should expect things to go wrong. "And many among them shall stumble; fallen and broken; snared and captured" (Isa 8:15). There are consequences for rejecting God.

Proverbs teaches: "The discipline of the LORD, my son, do not spurn; do not disdain his reproof; for whom the LORD loves he reproves, as a father, the son he favors" (Pr3:11-12). Yes, they appear to fall out of favor with the Lord from their perspective, but a more accurate reading is that they are being disciplined. Hebrews teaches: "They disciplined us for a short time as seemed right to them, but he does so for our benefit, in order that we may share his holiness. At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it" (Heb 12:10-11).

The 8th chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah ends with the promise of salvation under a new Davidic King. "There is no gloom where there had been distress. Where once he degraded the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, now he has glorified the way of the Sea, the land across the Jordan, Galilee of the Nations" (8:23).

The beginning of Jesus's ministry fulfills the hope of a brighter future that Isaiah had foretold of at the outset of the Babylonian Exile. "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen" (Mt 4:11-12). This is where our Gospel from Matthew begins. Baptized by John in the Jordan, Jesus has just emerged from 40 days in the desert. When he was hungry and tired and at a physical low point, the devil came to tempt him. Jesus rebuffed the devil.

He asks us to do the same. "The central message of Jesus' preaching is the coming of the kingdom of heaven and the need for repentance, a complete change of heart and conduct, on the part of those who are to receive this great gift of God" (Mt Intro). No matter how tired we may feel, Jesus is offering us strength to say no to temptation and to rebuff the devil.

One may see in Isaiah's prophecy of thousands of years ago, a timely message for our own day and age. The promised land of milk and honey has become barren and desolate. The freedoms we once took for granted have been severely restricted. We are all called to exercise great discipline in order to limit the spread of the virus, to care for those who are sick, and to reprioritize away from a certain selfishness to a much greater and nobler concern for the common good.

The message of Jesus is no less timely. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17). While a worldwide pandemic appears to be a time of doom and gloom, that which helps us to turn back to God and to draw closer to Christ is ultimately healing and redeeming. "At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it. So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees. Make straight paths for your feet, that what is lame may not be dislocated but healed." (Heb 12:11-13).