

Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
22 January 2017

Matthew 4:12-23

I want to tell you a story about you and your connection to a small village in El Carmen, San Nicolas, Honduras. The connection comes in the form of a church we have been building in this poor farming village since 2010. But, this connection is deeper than a small rural church. This connection also has a face. I want to tell you the story of a young boy named Antony (no “H”). A beautiful, olive-skin, light brown eyes boy, who is the son of one of the leaders of the congregation for whom we built the church. When we arrived to start the building of the church in 2010, the leader’s wife was almost 8 months pregnant and having serious complications with her pregnancy. Doctors had noted serious irregularities with the pregnancy the family could not understand or explained. Throughout the week of construction various people in the village asked me if I would pray for her and her unborn baby. Finally, on Thursday of the week, almost five days after our arrival, Gregorio, the leader asked to speak with me privately.

He told me the local village doctor believed his wife needed to be hospitalized for three to four weeks before the delivery to treat both mother and child for a serious condition they had identified in an exam. If his wife delivered in the village, there was a strong possibility that the child would not survive, and there was a risk to the baby as well. He then proceeded to ask for my prayers for God to give him the wisdom to help his wife at this difficult time. The idea of a hospital in Tegucigalpa was out of the question. The family lived in a small mud hut and had no money even for groceries. Honduras has no indigent care in their hospitals and healthcare is exclusively a cash-for-service enterprise. The family had made a decision to trust God and love their child, even if he was born deformed.

Obviously, this decision did not sit well with me and in an impulsive gesture I told him, “Take your wife to the hospital today! My church will pay for the bills!” I didn’t exactly know how this would work, but, we took Gregorio and his wife to the bus stop and gave them enough money for the fare and some spending money once they got to the hospital. They would get a full budget of all treatments and send it to us immediately and I would send whatever money was necessary as soon as I return to the United States. We sent the family off and I began to make plans to lounge a large fundraising campaign once I got to Saint Francisville. The by late Friday we received a call that we needed to send \$400 dollars to start the treatment and would be notified of the rest within a week or two. We sent the money, finished the mission and returned home.

Several weeks later, I did receive a bill. One i could not believe. The left over amount for the four weeks hospitalization and the delivery was \$280 dollars. Which means the total amount of the treatment was \$680 dollars. The child was still weak, but had survived the delivery and the hospital doctors had confirmed that without the treatment the child most likely would have died at the village.

As they years went by, I had almost forgotten the story. Now, seven years later, just last week, we arrived at the village to paint the church we had built seven years ago. As soon as we arrived, this beautiful little boy and his sister attached themselves to our team and became our closest friends. They took pictures with almost every member of the team, allowed themselves to be hugged frequently, and became our companions as we set out to start painting. At some point during the afternoon, Gregorio, the leader joined us at the church and saw me playing with the young boy. With a huge smile on his face he said, "This is Antony, my son. He is the one whose life your church saved seven years ago." Suddenly, I remember the story. A young woman was able to give birth to a beautiful, healthy baby, because a group of Episcopalians from Louisiana had chosen to share their faith with the people of this village. I looked at that healthy, and energetic boy and realized that I had spent less than \$700 dollars to save his life.

I have been thinking a great deal about Antony this week, as I have read the scripture passages for this Sunday. We have a great theme of darkness and light running through these readings. In Isaiah 9:1, we read, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined." Then in Psalm 27:1 we read, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?" And then, in the Gospel of Matthew, we read that Jesus moved to Capernaum after the arrest of John the Baptist, which Matthew interprets as the fulfillment of the prophesy of Isaiah, "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—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."

We know much about darkness and light. In fact we have seen some of the darkest nights in the last few weeks.

Darkness is unsettling

Darkness conjures up images of threat and danger

Darkness is the condition of a heart who does not know God

Darkness is the place of shadows, of uncertainty, of fear

Sometimes this darkness is physical, there is just no light, no electricity. Other times this darkness is interior: the darkness of hopelessness and helplessness, the darkness of anxiety, the darkness of depression, the darkness of spiritual drought... the darkness of times when God feels so absent from our lives and our homes. The darkness of doubt

There are other times when the darkness is produced by human evil. The darkness of political tyranny, the darkness of hatred and intolerance, the darkness of subjugation and slavery, the darkness of governmental corruption and lawlessness, and the darkness of greed and avarice. We are people who are constantly threatened by darkness, but we are very blessed that we live on this side of the resurrection. To us a light has appeared. God has sent us his light, who is none other than his son, Jesus of Nazareth. And this light ushers in a new

age of HOPE. God has not abandoned his people. He walks alongside and he will bring us safely home when our days are done. This light illumines a dark world with the radiance of FAITH. God can be trusted to fulfill his promises and the righteous lives by faith. We trust God at his word. We know that we are in the palm of his hands and that he will never leave us nor abandon us. This light brings ASSURANCE that our salvation is not dependent on our human behavior and what we can do for God, but, rather, on what God has already done for us his children. This light brings SALVATION, VINDICATION, and FREEDOM. Our deficits no longer has to define us. Our sin no longer has the power to control us and limit us. In Christ our identity has changed and we are now Children of the Most High God!

And this light is still with us here today. Sometimes his light comes in through the intervention of a group of missionaries from Louisiana, a neighbor who calls just when we are the most desperate, and small gesture of kindness shown at the right moment... The problem is not that we don't see this light from God. The problem is that our eyes are closed shut. We need to open our eyes to see God's light, because even though we often only see the darkness, God's light is all around us...

And this light brings COMFORT and JOY. Behold the old has passed, the new has come! Open your eyes and let God's light fill your life, your home, and your community with the radiance of his love.

Amen!