Isaiah 9: 1-2

[Psalm 27: 1-9](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=15#psalm_reading)

[1 Corinthians 1:10-18](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=15#epistle_reading)

[Matthew 4: 12-23](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=15#gospel_reading)

PROPHECY AND PROVIDENCE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: “I go to prepare a place for you”

Our gospel passage from Matthew this morning describes the very beginning of Christ's ministry, and he tells us that the very first thing Jesus did was to leave his hometown of Nazareth and move to a town called Capernaum, which is right on the coast of the lake of Galilee, in what he calls “the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali,” and he quotes Isaiah giving a prediction about that region 700 hundred years earlier, and that prediction from Isaiah is what Donna read from us this morning.

In bringing up that ancient prediction of Isaiah, Matthew is doing something that's very characteristic of the way in which he wrote his gospel. Matthew was always looking for things in the Hebrew Scriptures that might be interpreted as mentioning or foreshadowing Jesus in some way or other. Matthew is sometimes referred to as the most Jewish of all the gospels, and that's one of the reasons why. The audience he was writing for was entirely Jewish, and therefore they would have been familiar with or at least respectful of the sacred Hebrew Scriptures, so anytime he could find something in those scriptures that he could make apply to the life or work of Jesus, you can be sure he'd mention it.

Let me talk a little bit about this prophecy of Isaiah, and then we'll come back to our passage from Matthew.

Those of you who have been with us in our Bible Study group recently will recognize Zebulun and Naphtali as the names of two of the twelve sons of Jacob, who in turn fathered many descendants who formed tribes that were named after them. When the Israelites entered and conquered Canaan after wandering in the desert for forty years, each of the tribes was allotted a certain portion of land that became its tribal territory, just like in America you had the Iroquois and the Seneca and the Oneida and so on, each with its own recognized region.

Well, Zebulun and Naphtali were regions of land way up in the north, and they basically hit the lottery when the land was divided up, because that northern part of Canaan was far and away the most fertile and beautiful of all. It was so rich and fertile, in fact, that it pretty much became the breadbasket for the rest of Israel, and over the many centuries - during which that territory came to be known as Galilee – it grew in population to have greater wealth and far more people than the other regions. No one knows how many people, of course, but a historian who was a rough contemporary of Jesus wrote that there were over 200 cities in Galilee, all of which had at least 15,000 people. Do the math, and that adds up to over 3 million folks, all living in an area about one and a half times the size of Orleans county.

And it wasn't just tremendously fertile, it was also perfectly located to become a vibrant and thriving country. The main north-south trade route between Syria to the north and Egypt to the south ran right through it, as well as the main route leading directly from the Mediterranean to the countries to the east. That it turn drew people from all over the known world to Galilee, and it became a rich, sophisticated, almost cosmopolitan region.

That's the good news. The bad news is that it also made a region an attractive target for invading armies wishing to profit from all that wealth. The worst happened in 722 B.C., when the empire of Assyria invaded and conquered the whole region. It remained under that subjugation for many centuries, but that initial conquest was what Isaiah, who lived during the time of that conquest, was writing about when he made his prediction about the future.

He predicted a time when the heel of occupation would be lifted from the neck of that part of Israel, and he prophesied that it would be a conquering hero of Israel who would accomplish it. That’s what he’s talking about in our passage. Let me read it again.

[***1***](http://biblehub.com/isaiah/9-1.htm)*Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed,  
As when at first He lightly esteemed  
The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,  
And afterward more heavily oppressed her,  
By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan,  
In Galilee of the Gentiles.*[***2***](http://biblehub.com/isaiah/9-2.htm)*The people who walked in darkness  
Have seen a great light;  
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,  
Upon them a light has shined.*

And so, since Jesus had begun his ministry on Galilee – the modern name for the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali – Matthew in effect said: look, here’s another fulfillment of a prophecy in our holy scriptures.

I myself in my current way of thinking don't believe in prophecy, in the sense of having certain knowledge of the future, although obviously people can and do make predictions about the future to their heart's content, and sometimes those predictions turn out to be right, although usually they don't. If Al Gore had been right a dozen years ago, California and New York City would be underwater by now: And I don't mean that to be politically charged, just as an obvious example from recent memory.

So I don't think Isaiah had a crystal ball that enabled him to see the future. But to withhold belief in prophecy is not to withhold belief in God's providence, and focusing on God's amazing providence, I think, reveals the true wonder of God's all-knowing grace.

And we see that, I think, if we reflect on the actual reality reported by Matthew, as opposed to his attempt to bolster the story with prophecy. In this passage, Matthew really reports three things. First, Jesus went to Galilee to conduct his ministry. Second, he enlisted some fishermen to help him. And third, he taught in the synagogues.

Let's consider each of those in turn, in search of God's providence.

First, Galilee. Why did Jesus establish his ministry in Galilee? The answer is because only there could he have found an attentive and sympathetic audience. Unlike Judea to the south, Galilee had been conquered and reconquered many times over the centuries, each time bringing in new ideas and new blood, much of that blood not even Jewish. It was a country full of energetic and even hot-headed people, who were not stultified by ancient Jewish traditions. The roads I mentioned earlier connected it with the rest of the world, and on a daily basis those worldly travelers would pass through its precincts, with their different ideas about culture and religion. As we read in Isaiah, from ancient times Galilee was referred to as “Galilee of the Gentiles,” not only because it was so non-Jewish in many ways, but because it was literally surrounded by Gentile nations: Phoenicia to the west, Syria to the north and east, and even the south, the territory of the Samaritans.

Nowhere else in Israel could Jesus have found an openness to his revolutionary message except in Galilee, because of its unique history and location. And surely that speaks to the providence of God. Just as Jesus himself promised his disciples that he would prepare a place for them, surely Galilee was the perfect place prepared by God for his Son to do his work.

And even the lake of Galilee, and the fishermen casting their nets on its shore...surely they were themselves a product of God's providence. For being fishermen requires a certain character, a character that would have qualified them to be Christ's own representatives.

Fishermen must be patient, and not expect immediate results. He must have perseverance, the quality of continued effort, even when the efforts do not seem to bear fruit. And aren't those the qualities needed to be fishers of men?

And on a lake like Galilee, which was notorious for its sudden and deadly storms, a fisherman required courage: he must be prepared to withstand the fury of the sea, just as a fisher of souls must be prepared to withstand the fury of those who reject the truth.

Fisherman must select the right bait, the bait appropriate to the fish. It's the same lesson that Paul learned, and then taught that he must become all things to all people, in order to win some. That's something the fisherman already knows from long experience.

And finally, good fishermen must be non-obtrusive, not even allowing their shadow to fall where the fish might be lurking. Just so, the messengers of Christ would need to remember, first and foremost, to direct attention to Jesus himself, and away from themselves.

Considering all that, is it too much to conclude that God's hand was involved in the creation of exactly that lake in exactly that place, for the formation of people of exactly the right character and personality to serve as Christ's representatives? I don't think so. I think it’s entirely plausible.

Or think about the synagogues where Jesus began to spread his message. Although there was only one temple and that was in Jerusalem, every town and village, however small, had its synagogue. But where the temple was exclusively reserved for blood sacrifice, the synagogues were exclusively used for teaching. And those synagogues were the perfect place for a new preacher to deliver a new message.

Each synagogue service had three parts: prayer, then a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, and finally an address or sermon. But it was very different from what we do in our churches. There was no professional ministry. Any distinguished person might be asked to give the address, and anyone deemed qualified by the administrator of the synagogue might be allowed to do so.

That was exactly what Jesus needed: an audience of people who were sincerely interested in religion and willing to listen to him. And after the address, there would always be a time for questioning and discussion, so that Jesus might elaborate on whatever the subject of his address had been.

In other words, it was the very best, and possibly the only way that the message of Christ could have been introduced and have begun to take root. And isn't it just awfully lucky that that one special opportunity would have been available in Galilee? Lucky? I don't think so. If we look with an open heart, I think we can see the whole history of the Jewish religion leading by God's guidance to the creation of those humble little synagogues.

So, prophecy versus providence. I've said I don't believe in prophecy, at least in the crude sense of having detailed and certain knowledge of the distant future. But of course, I could be wrong. But whether or not, I do think that reflecting about the amazing way in which the world was prepared, at a certain time and a certain place, to receive the entry of eternity into human history, is the deepest and most profound way of coming to grips with the amazing grace and wonder of the true meaning of the words with which, according to Matthew, Jesus began his ministry: Rethink your world, Jesus said, for the Kingdom of God is now at hand.

And so our sermon prayer for this morning, Heavenly Father, is to find deeper meaning and greater pleasure in contemplating your providence, the divine hand that prepared the ground that it might receive the seed of the great tree of grace under which all things on heaven and earth, visible or invisible, living and dead, past and future, will be gathered unto him who is before all things and in whom all things hold together, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.