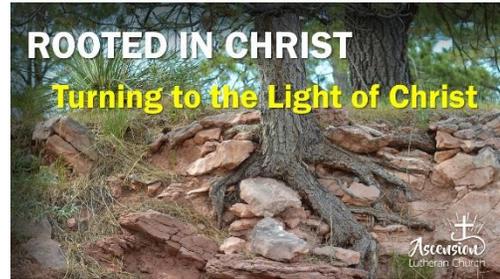


**TURNING TO THE LIGHT OF CHRIST**

Do you know where Jesus began his public ministry?... In a place described as a land of darkness.

- Where does Jesus go first? Into the darkness to find those lost there.
- Jesus goes into the darkness to be the light of grace and truth.



Matthew 4 describes the start of Jesus' ministry

poetically by quoting Isaiah: *"The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"*

If you feel you are in a dark place right now:

- Hear this... it's perfectly normal to experience darkness when it's dark out... and it's very dark out right now.
- Know this... the darkness is exactly the first place Jesus goes to find the people who need him most.

Do you know how you see in the dark?

- You don't. It's dark. You need some light to see.
- That's what Jesus is, the light in your darkness.

What's the first thing that Jesus does when he arrives in the darkness? He begins to preach.

- What? What kind of help is that?
- Know this, God's word is always the first and most important help there is.
- The deepest darkness is spiritual, a darkness of the heart and mind.
- God's word cuts right to that spiritual darkness like a surgeon going for the cancerous root of the problem.

What's the first word of Jesus's sermon of rescue to these poor people living in darkness? Surely, it must be some gentle word of tender caring?

- Nope! "Repent!" that's the word.
- "Stop!" "Wrong way!" "Turn this way!" In an emergency, these ARE words of love.
- Said with love, repent is a word of love.
- Repent means to turn because we're going the wrong way.
- Repent means to experience of change your heart and mind so it better reflects God's light.

Our fall theme has been "Rooted in Christ"... Rooted in God's Word.

- Consider the trees. Not only their strength but also their ability to be flexible comes from their roots.
- Being deeply rooted allows you to be flexible without falling.
- Flexibility is strength that is able to bend without breaking.

We live in a time of such polarized inflexibility, and it's breaking us all.

The word we as Christians need to be rooted in is God's gospel word. Let me unpack that.

- God's word comes to us as both law and gospel.
- The gospel, not the law, is how God saves us - faith in Christ's atoning work on the cross is how we are saved, not by being perfect or good enough or right in all our opinions.
- The law is how we live it out our faith, this gift of salvation we have been given, for the sake of not only ourselves but others, especially those others still trapped in the darkness.

Here's the big thing: It is the gospel that defines and unites us as Christians, not the law.

- We are rooted in the gospel.
- From those roots, we then branch out in morality, justice, and love... all of which are qualities and fruit of the kingdom of God that Christ came to bring.

Here's the next big thing: Christians who are equally rooted in the gospel will still disagree on matters of the law and how to best live out the gospel.

- This disagreement among Christ-followers on matters of the law is something you can find right in the pages of the New Testament itself.
- On some matters, the Apostle Paul says we should even allow individual conscience to decide.
- For one set of good reasons, some see it one way. For another set of good reasons, others see it another way.
- Security in our roots allows for flexibility in our branches.
- On some matters, yes, we can differ and still be united in Christ.
- But to do this right, we must find a way to respect one another in our disagreements, knowing our deeper unity comes from being equally rooted in Christ.

This all applies also to politics, of course.

- As Christians we are called to be good citizens, which inescapably involves politics, and if in nothing else, at least in the responsibility to vote.

Yes, as Christians, we will also differ with one another in politics.

- Even so, we are all still called by Christ to approach our political decision making through the grounding of our Christian faith, the same ground of Christ in which we are all rooted.
- Do not be like those who approach politics through the lens of self-interest alone.
- For each issue, test it with God's word and prayer.
- There is no one Christian political party; every political party is compromised in some ways; so, always ask yourself, what better fits God's Kingdom in this matter or with this vote?

Did you ever notice how plants stay healthy by turning to the light?

- Trees will branch and leaf out in ways that best capture the light.
- Some flowers will actually bend and follow the light, tracking it across a day or a season.
- Their roots remain firmly secure which allows them to keep turning to God's life-giving light.
- Maybe there's a lesson there for us as we struggle with how to live out our faith in life?
- Keep rooted in Christ but keep turning to his light.

Amen.