



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Epiphany Isaiah 60:1-6 & St. Matthew 2:1-12

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Epiphany is about light. It's about the light of Christ come into the world. In the earliest days of the Church, before Christmas was on our calendar, Epiphany was *the* great feast of what we now think of as the Christmas season. It was the celebration of the light come into the world. In the Eastern Church, Epiphany is still their "Christmas". In the West we've separated the two, but the theme is the same: at Christmas we celebrate the Incarnation of the eternal Son of God in the God-Man, Jesus. We think of Mary and Joseph with their newborn baby in the stable and of those Jewish shepherds the angels sent to worship him. The light that had been promised for so long had come. And yet at Epiphany, which closes the Christmas season, we're reminded again of the light, but this time the Church directs our thoughts back to the wise men from the east: those kings or astrologers who followed God's guidance, given by a star, to worship the king. The Church points us to those kings from the east to remind us that Jesus came not only to be a light to the Jews, but a light to the whole world; he came to Jew and Gentile alike. Up to that point the Church was only for the descendants of Abraham, but in Jesus, God opened the Church to all who will believe and trust in the Saviour.

Today is about light, and yet how often do we take that light for granted? We live in a world of light. Even physically speaking, we live in an age of electricity. It's hard to imagine what it was like even a century or more ago when work stopped at sunset

and people gathered around campfires and fireplaces or around candles and kerosene lamps with the darkness all around. But we also live in a world of spiritual light. As much as we see spiritual darkness around us, you and I live in a world that has been dramatically impacted by the Gospel of Jesus Christ for 2000 years. We live in a world *this* side of the cross of Calvary and *this* side of the empty tomb in Gethsemane. We live in a world where Satan has been conquered and bound by the victory of our Lord. We're prone to forgetting what it was like on the *other* side of the cross.

Close your eyes and imagine darkness. When I was about five years old a missionary from central Africa visited our church and showed a film about the place where he had been ministering for decades. The movie was scary. It talked about and showed the sorts of evil things that Christian missionaries encountered in that culture: evil gods and witch doctors, magic and voodoo, curses and blood sacrifices. And yet as scary as those things were, all of them were subject to the lordship of Jesus Christ through his victory over Satan at the cross. As evil as evil is in our world, it was worse before the light of Christ came. Think back to the things we've studied in Genesis: to Noah's time, when the earth was full of violence—so full that God could declare that there was only *one* righteous man left. Consider the pagan mindset that built the tower of Babel; men and women had lost *all* knowledge of God. They practiced sacrifices and rituals—they worshiped—in an effort to control gods they couldn't understand or predict. Think of Abraham, living amongst the Canaanites—some of the most spiritually depraved people the world has every known. Their worship involved ritual prostitution and the sacrifice of their own children. Think of the men of Sodom, every one of them down to the last man, ready to commit sexual violence against God's messengers. There is darkness in the world today, but little compares to the

darkness that was in the world before Jesus came.

Brothers and sisters, God has given us his light. But with that gift comes responsibility: he calls his people to be light in the midst of the world's darkness. God has *always* called his people to be light in the darkness. Think of his command to Abraham: walk before me and be blameless. God had promised that Abraham would be a blessing to the nations. It started with Abraham demonstrating to the pagans around him what it looked like to live in the light. And yet how often have God's people retreated? How often have they—have we—taken the light and retreated into our churches, closed the shutters, and locked the doors? How often have we even abandoned the light? The people of Israel and Judah were repeatedly taken to task for living in the dark when they should have been living in the light. The prophets warned them again and again: The nations know we worship one whom we believe to be the one and true God; they know he has called us be different; but they mock our unbelief and our lack of faith, jeering at us and asking, "Where is their God?" God calls us to be different; he calls us to be light. But how often does the world look at us and see nothing different than what's in the darkness?

Even at the best of times, even when Israel was living before God the way he had called her to live, she was in bondage. Last Sunday we read from St. Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians that before Jesus came his people were slaves to the law. God had given them light, he'd called them to live in that light, but compared to Jesus, it was a dim light. The law given through Moses taught the people what holiness looked like, but it gave them no way to live up to it. Before Jesus came, God's law was written on tablets of stone: something to aspire to, but impossible to keep. And so the people offered sacrifices at the temple for the forgiveness of their sins—for all the times they broke the law. And

those sacrifices were made day in and day out, animal after animal slaughtered by the priests, and a river of blood running into the valley below. There was no permanent escape from the darkness. The gentiles lives in bondage to their pagan darkness and false gods, but even the Jews lived in bondage to the law. They had the light, but no way to fully live it out. It was tempting for them to give up hope: either to retreat into the temple, that one place where they could be directly in God's light, or to give up the light completely and walk in the same darkness as the pagans.

In the midst of that darkness, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah. These are the words of our Old Testament lesson. In ancient times they were read for today's Epistle. God calls his people to live in hope. Look at Isaiah 60:1-2:

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.

Think of the Christmas Gospel written by St. John: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it....The true light, which enlightens everyone, was come into the world" (John 1:4-5, 9). When Joseph and Mary took Jesus to present him in the temple forty days after his birth, the baby was greeted by Simeon who had spent his life waiting for the fulfilment of this prophecy. He took Jesus in his arms and blessed God singing:

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the

Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)

Isaiah had declared: "Arise, shine for your light has come!" Simeon held the light in his arms as he sang praises to God, knowing that he could die in peace having lived to see its coming. In Jesus the light came. He shone his light by preaching the kingdom of God, by calling men and women to repentance, and by demonstrating his power over Satan and over the curse that fell on Adam because of his sin. When Jesus died he paid the penalty for our sin and when he rose on the third day, he conquered sin and death and Satan. Then he ascended back to heaven where he sits at the Father's right hand to rule his kingdom—his Church.

It's interesting that when we celebrate the feast of the Ascension, we extinguish the Paschal candle after reading the Ascension Gospel. Jesus, the light of the world returned to his father and so we douse the Easter candle that symbolises his presence. And yet when Jesus ascended, he didn't leave us in the dark. In fact, he left precisely because he didn't plan to leave us in the dark. He left so that he could send his Spirit and it's his Spirit who changes everything. In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit would occasionally fill someone to perform some special task, as he did with Bezalel and Oholiab to inspire them as craftsman when they oversaw the building of the tabernacle or as he did with Samson when he pulled down the temple of Dagon. And yet in each case the Spirit left when the task was done. In the New Covenant, Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to fill us perpetually. In our baptism he pours his Spirit into us and it's that Holy Spirit who unites us to Jesus, making us part of his body, and who causes the new life given by Jesus to flow into us and to empower us. It's the Holy Spirit who takes God's law, which was written on stone tablets in the Old Covenant, and who engraves it on our hearts. The Jews lived with the

light of God—his holiness—on the outside. We now live with the light of God in our hearts—on the inside. And, too, we have his Word, spoken by the prophets and apostles, still with us. St. Peter talks about it saying:

We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to lamp shining in a dark place. (2 Peter 2:19)

And, brothers and sisters, when the light shines through us—when we live the new life that Jesus gives—we draw others to the light. That's how God has designed his kingdom to work. It grows, but it grows as God sovereignly draws new men and women to *his* light shining *through us*. Think again of the thick and desperate darkness that surrounded God's people in the days of Isaiah. The Jews lived in fear of the nations around them. They were at the crossroad of the ancient world and nations like Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon all wanted their territory. The nations came to Jerusalem, but they came wanting to conquer and to take. And yet Isaiah writes about day when the nations will come because of the light and they will come, not to conquer and to take, but to give and to bless. Look at verse 3:

And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

The light—Jesus—will turn the hearts of the nations to God. They'll be drawn to the kingdom by the light that they see in us. In the verses that follow, Isaiah declares that the wealth of the nations shall be brought by those seeking the light: the abundance of the sea, the wealth of nations, and multitude of camels, and—in verse 6—gold and frankincense.

That gift of gold and frankincense point to today's Gospel: to St. Matthew's account of the wise men coming to worship Jesus. We're all

familiar with the story. These wealthy and powerful men, probably from Persia, saw a star in the sky. They may well have been familiar with some of the Old Testament prophets who had foretold the future birth of the Messiah King. And so, using the star as their guide, they travelled to Bethlehem where they worshiped the King and gave him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. These were the first Gentiles, kings who represented the pagan nations, to come in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy to worship and bless the light and to seek God's kingdom. They, themselves, brought prophetic gifts that bore witness to the roles that Jesus would play as he brought light to the world. They brought gold, a gift for a king; they brought frankincense, a costly incense used to worship one who was God; and they brought myrrh, a valuable ointment used in embalming and a gift that pointed to the sacrifice that Jesus would make at the cross.

And yet, friends, the gifts that the wise men brought point to ways in which you and I can worship and bear witness to the light and, as we do so, shine our own lights brightly in the darkness. Jesus has given us the gift of eternal life by giving us his own self. That's grace! We didn't earn it. We didn't deserve it. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And yet we ought to respond to grace by offering ourselves back to Jesus. I like the way Pius Parsch put it:

“The man of grace likewise brings to God the gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Gold is the most precious of all metals. We, too, must give the most precious treasure of our hearts. This is love of God and also the fidelity and purity of our aspirations. It must not be simply gilt that glitters, but purest gold that has been tried by fire. Incense is the symbol of our prayer life, our dedication to God and our piety. Myrrh is the symbol of our suffering. Christ the bridegroom travels the way of the cross, and His bride can take no other way. Love,

devotion, and suffering are the fruits of the tree of grace.”¹

Our light is often dim—it's not as bright as it should be—because we're unwilling to offer the real treasure of our hearts to God. Instead of pure gold, we bring him gilt and glitter. Like Cain, we offer God the things that are left over after we've met our own needs and wants, instead of giving back to him off the top and living in faith, trusting him to take care of us. Too often we're happy to trust him with the things that are easy to give to him, but we hold back the things that are hard to give up, whether our finances, our time, or our relationships.

In the tabernacle there was a perpetual cloud of incense rising up from the altar, symbolizing the prayers and worship of the people. Do we live our lives in the context of constant prayer and worship? Or do we pray only when we can fit it in? Do we join our brothers and sisters for worship only when it's convenient? Jesus draws a connection between worship and obedience: If you love me, keep my commandments. And yet how often are we only obedient when it's convenient for us?

And, finally, think of the myrrh. Jesus suffered for us—even unto death. The eternal Son of God, the Word by whom God created all things, humbled himself and became a human being. And he didn't cause himself to be born of a wealthy queen. No, he came to us as the son of a poor, teenage girl and wife of a carpenter. And the King of glory didn't stop there. He endured the unjust abuse of unbelievers. When he was arrested and beaten, he didn't call an end to his suffering in the high priests court. When Pilate's soldiers beat him and put a crown of thorns on his head, he didn't stop—that still wasn't enough suffering. No, he allowed himself to be paraded through

Jerusalem and across the valley to Calvary where they nailed him to a cross and let him hang there until he died. He didn't deserve any of that, and yet he suffered humiliation, beating, and death for our sake. How willing are we to suffer for his? Why did the early Church grow so rapidly? In large part, because it was watered with the blood of martyrs who were willing to shine for Jesus even when it meant their own deaths. By comparison you and I have it easy. And yet, how often are we unwilling to suffer even a little bit for Jesus and for his kingdom?

Brothers and sisters, the light of God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ who gave his all to conquer sin and death for our sake. Let us be ready to give him the treasure of our hearts, to give him our prayers and our worship, and to be prepared to suffer that his light might shine brightly through us in the midst of the darkness.

Let us pray: O God, who by the leading of a star manifested your beloved Son to the gentiles: mercifully grant that we, who know you now by faith, may give him our own gold, frankincense, and myrrh and manifest his light in the midst of the world's darkness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ *Sermons on the Liturgy* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1953), p. 53.