

Sunday, January 7, 2018– Epiphany Sunday (Observed)
“Light”

Isaiah 60: 1-6

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Metaphorical Movement

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

As dawn breaks on a new year, we have short days and long nights. Even here our coldest days are nothing compared to those in freezing cold back East and yet... the days just feel short.

We are not nocturnal creatures. We naturally wake with the sun and are inclined to sleep in the dark. We crave the light and when there is not enough, we'll search frantically, desperately for a source. If you've ever pulled your cell phone out of your pocket to assist you as you're fumbling with your keys or feeling your way through a dark room, you know what I say is true. Yes, it makes sense to desire light over darkness. In our text today Isaiah says:

“Arise and shine for your light has come, the glory of the Lord rises upon you! See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.”

Jim Lovell, an Apollo astronaut recounted an electrical failure in his aircraft back before NASA, when he was a fighter pilot. Everything in the cockpit was pitch black. Not knowing what to do, he fell back in his seat and happened to glance down, where he saw a faint greenish glow. He realized it was bioluminescence, light given off by many marine organisms, in this case, algae when it is churned up in the wake of a ship. Following the trail of dim algae light saved him, as he was able to fly his way back to his aircraft carrier safely.

Light is more than a luxury – it's essential to our life. Isaiah speaks hopeful words to a nation hearing prophecies of doom and darkness – their light is coming and God's presence will be with them again, as personal and immediate as the glory of the Lord in a thick cloud leading them through the wilderness out of slavery in Egypt. But God won't only come to help Israel, look, he says, lift up your eyes and see the nations, churning the wake, following off and leading the way to the Light! Everyone will trail to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn, lift up your eyes and look about you as all assemble and come to you.

This day, we celebrate the fulfillment of that prophecy in a strange yet well-known event in which three pagan astrologers make their way west from modern day Iraq or Iran, following the light of a star shining in the night sky and obscure religious texts from the Hebrew people in the Roman province of Judea. They come bringing wealth and riches, gold, frankincense and myrrh – extremely expensive and valuable gifts, fit for audience with a king. They stop to visit King Herod but the gifts are not for him – of him they ask only for the location of a new and better king. They search and finally find a young couple with a child and bow down and worship a little two year old boy named Jesus.

It's a strange thing, this Epiphany story. Light is a symbol for Epiphany. It's the time when we remember that Jesus is the light of the world, the presence of God coming to live with us. We need Him, because his light blinds out the darkness.

What are the dark areas that cover our lives today? We all have them. They're the things in the corner of our hearts, the things dusty and packed away, the things we want no one to see – we may even think if we hide ourselves in the dark and we can't see them that they're not really there – but they are. And the problem is, no matter how safely tucked away in the dark our problems, our issues are, they take up space and prevent us from enjoying the forgiveness Jesus won for us in all parts of our life. So where do sin, death and the devil work hard all around you to cover and darken your heart? Is it a grudge? Guilt from past sins? Compulsions or addictions? Overwhelming anxiety? People-pleasing and approval seeking? What are the things in life that instead of fruits of the spirit like gentleness, patience, peace and self-control lead instead to sadness, pain and regret? What things prevent us from seeing the saving light of Jesus upon us? What darkness does the light of Jesus need to outshine and dispel from our lives so that the Lord will rise upon us and His glory be seen in us?

Hear this: Jesus shines. Yes, the proverbial light but even more than the nearly inexhaustible resources of the sun is a generous, over the top, positively beaming array of things like forgiveness for what we do wrong, compassion and mercy. When we crowd out the light and cast a shadow over the dark places in our lives, we only hurt ourselves. But when the truth beams forth from Jesus and shines light on what's hurtful and ugly and sinful, or what we're ashamed of about ourselves, there's nothing to do except confess. Confession means to

state the truth – in this case, the truth about our lives, warts and all. And so we speak the truth and when we confess the light shines through the darkness and obliterates it. Like a lightning rod beckons the lightning bolt to itself, Jesus drew sadness, bitterness, envy, all the darkness onto Himself on the cross and throws out His light to us.

But it's not only sin that we hold up to be confessed and taken out of hiding. It's our traumas, hurts, pains, whether they be physical, emotional or spiritual. The psychology community has learned this same truth – often we hide or cover up as a way to protect ourselves, not knowing how to handle a situation. Therapy with a psychologist, confession and absolution with a pastor, conversations with a trusted advisor or mentor or friend or even honest feedback from our spouse can be a way for the light of truth to shine on some dark corner we'd rather avoid. Wounds from a friend are better than kisses from an enemy. Pretending it's not there only works for a little while because it rots and festers and grows – it can poison us and work its way out of the darkness.

My friends, Epiphany is about Jesus showing us Himself. Tada! Here I am! Know me, I mean, really get to know me, not just thinking you know all there is to know already, not just knowing things ABOUT me but knowing me, personally.

Married people, come on – how many of you fully know your spouse. I mean, they never, ever surprise you, you never make a misstep with them. Of course not – there's always more to know. And with Jesus, there's so much to know – Savior. Brother. King. Judge. Friend. Shepherd. And no matter where you are in life, how old or young, male or female, happy or sad or anywhere in between, there's more of Jesus to know.

And so this Epiphany, the Jesus, our shining light who has come shines something new into the dark crevices of your life and mine and as we interact with Him again, there's always more to see. The same thing is true for the rest of the world. If you've been a Christian many years you've probably seen time and again how God's Word calls you out of darkness and draws you to the light. Yet you and I are just some of the people trailing toward the light – like bioluminescence in the ship's wake, beckoning people to land safely with Jesus. When the Church shares the Good News of Jesus His light streams out.

Who are the people in your life who need that light, whose dark corners are unexplored, who can't see or are walking in the wrong direction? I'm talking people like the astrologers sometimes given the misnomer "wise men," people who follow the light and at the end can do nothing except bow down and worship Jesus? You and I were once like them, called out of darkness and brought into the light, quite apart from anything we did. Who is in your neighborhood? Among your friends? Your colleagues? To whom do we, most of us Gentiles from other nations who have seen the light – to whom do we bring the good news and praises of the Lord?

Two challenges this morning.

1. Commit to using this season of Epiphany to know Jesus better. He always has something new to say, and His light that shines through the darkness always has more sin to forgive and more pain and hurt to heal. This is a great time to start setting aside time each day to read our Bibles, pray and be still and sit with God. Check out the Bible reading plans on the back table this morning.

2. Always remember who you are – you carry the light of Christ. That light forgives, and it saves. It's not to be hidden, it's to be shared. Who around you needs to see that light?

In Jesus' name, Amen.