

6 January 2013
The Epiphany of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“In the Darkness, a Light Shines”

Text: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

(I am indebted to Rev. William Weedon from whose sermon on these readings I have liberally borrowed and adapted, as he helped me put my similar thoughts into the words and narrative of this sermon. Thank you brother.)

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

In the darkness, a light shines. That's what Isaiah says. And that Light is the Lord, he says. The glory of the Lord that has now arisen and calls nations and kings to come to it. Before, he says, they had been in darkness and fear, captive to sin and death, but now they all head to the light. They are drawn to it. Sons and daughters, he says. Everyone together. Abundance and wealth and a multitude of camels. Almost, it seems as if Isaiah is saying, as far as the eye can see. All coming. And in the midst of all this, mysterious visitors bringing gold and frankincense and proclaiming the praises of God - the God who has come shining the light of His mercy and love into our world and lives of darkness and death. That's Isaiah's vision and prophecy that we heard today.

In the darkness, a light shines. That's what Matthew says, too. Certain Wise Men saw it, he says. They saw it and wondered. They'd never seen such a star as this before. Perhaps they discussed what it could mean until they finally decide that it could mean only one thing: the long-awaited, long-promised, long-storied King of the Jews has finally been born.

And so they gather their gifts and begin their journey. Only when they arrive, it's as though no one had noticed! There are no big celebrations or national joy for the birth of a king - just business as usual. Or is it *darkness* as usual?

They're confused, so they inquire where the new born King can be found. But their question stirs up the ancient darkness and the one who caused it.

For Herod's heart is dark - make no mistake about it. He's a murderer who has already murdered close family for fear they were after his throne. Now news of a newborn King? The darkness stirred in his wicked heart. The people's hearts were then darkened by fear of the mad man who was their ruler. Perhaps the darkness

also threatened the hearts of the Wise Men as they stood before the creepy king, tempting them to go back, to be safe, to give up this search. *Could they have been wrong?*

Well, while they wait and wonder, Herod asks the chief priests and scribes where the Christ, so long foretold, was to be born. Then he calls the Wise Men secretly - more strangeness! - and tells them what he has learned: *You've got the wrong city. He's in Bethlehem. Down south. Go find him and then bring me back word so that I too may come and worship Him.*

So with hearts hopeful, and maybe a bit anxious, they set out into the darkness again, and they see it again! The mighty light, the star they had seen before, back again, shining through the darkness of the night, the darkness of the city, and the darkness threatening their hearts, and leading them to the place, to the King.

To a house. A normal house. A humble house. But no creepiness here. As they enter the house, they find another Light. *Isaiah's light.* The Light brighter than any star to the eyes of faith. It is a child in his mother's lap, and they fall down before Him. *God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God* incarnate in human flesh. *How long did they stay? How long did they wonder and marvel? . . .* They give Him their gifts, gifts for one who is a prophet, priest, and king, and then head home. Not the same way but a different way, away from the mad man. Not the same way but a different way, for their hearts had been forever changed by what they had seen. Not the same way but a different way, for a light had now been kindled that would never go out.

In the darkness, a light shines. That's what happened to a man named Saul of Tarsus, too. A man who, like creepy Herod, was once a man of darkness. It filled his heart and he raged against the Light that shone from the child grown to manhood. He, too, wasn't afraid to use violence and intimidation, persecution and suffering, to try and stamp it out. *It's all a lie,* he insisted to all who would listen. *Don't speak of Him, this Jesus. He's nothing but a fraud, nothing but another condemned and crucified rabble-rouser, and his lunatic followers are sweeping you away with their foolish stories.*

But then one day he - literally! - saw the light. The light that this child is and which He shines into this world. *God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God incarnate in human flesh, crucified, and now raised from the dead.* This Light unlike any other light blinded him, knocked him from his horse, turned his life upside down and inside out, and set him on a new course. The darkness was driven from his heart that day by that glorious light on the Damascus road. Light that embraced him, forgave him, loved him, gave him the promise of a life never to end, and then sent him as its messenger.

And like the Wise Men, he departed a different way. For Saul the persecutor became Paul the humble apostle. And he was given a mystery to proclaim, as we heard him explain today in his letter to the Ephesians: the light that shines in the darkness? This glory, this love, this forgiveness, this life - it's not a light for only this or that nation, or this or that person. It's a light for all people - even those with hearts as dark as Herod or Saul. And there is no heart too dark, too sinful, too far gone. This Light has come to make all people sons of God, heirs of eternal life, members of one body, partakers of this great promise.

This great promise: that no matter how dark the darkness gets, no matter how threatening, no matter how deep, no matter how evil - it could not, cannot, and will not overcome **your** Light. For Isaiah's Light, Paul's Light, your Light will continue to shine in the darkness to gather all people in. To gather together, as Isaiah saw, a great multitude of people, sons and daughters, nations and kings, all coming as **one** family gathered around **one** table celebrating **one** feast in a joy that never ends and where there is no more fear, darkness, tears, separation, suffering pain, or death. The Light of God's mercy and love to make all things new. To make you new. That you too depart a different way. No longer men and women mad with sin, but now forgiven and loved children of your heavenly Father.

In the darkness, a light shines. Yes, that's what happened to you, too, you see. The Wise Men's star and Paul's blinding light shine here for you too, leading you to see in this child, to see in this man, your Saviour. And so into the darkness of your heart the light of God's love and forgiveness shined in Holy Baptism. His Word and Spirit joined to those waters gave you the faith to see and believe - like the faith of the Wise Men who against all worldly wisdom fell on their knees and worshipped a humble child. Like the faith of Paul who against all worldly wisdom proclaimed a crucified man raised from the dead and that He would raise us too.

And the faith to repent of our sin, and of the darkness we still keep in a little corner of our hearts. The darkness that sometimes comes roaring out, that sometimes we use when we need it, that sometimes we think we enjoy, that honestly . . . we're afraid to let go of. But the Light of Christ leaves no shadows, and would sweep this darkness away too in forgiveness. That you live a new life.

Which is hard, because we still live in a dark world. But how do you best battle darkness? With more darkness? That's silly, isn't it? But it's how we think; it's what we often do. But may it no longer be so. *In the darkness, a light shines.* And as it has shined upon you, so may you now shine its light upon others. Conquering the darkness with light. Conquering evil with good, hate with love, sin with forgiveness. That's hard. Even scary at times. But that is still the light that the darkness could not, cannot, and will not overcome.

In the darkness, a light shines. Yes, that's Epiphany. For Epiphany is not really about the Wise Men - it's for the Wise Men. And for you. It is the light of the glory of God in Christ Jesus. The Light who went into our deepest darkness, who knew our suffering, who cried our tears, who died our death in darkness upon His cross for the forgiveness of our sins. But the Light who could not be snuffed out and so who rose from the dead and glorified now sits at the right hand of our Father in heaven. That Light which is shining now through Word and Sacrament, which we now see by faith, until that day when like Paul, we will see Him with our eyes when He comes again in all His glory.

Until that day, in the darkness the light is shining. The Light of Isaiah, of Paul, of the Wise Men, and of you. The Light gathering all peoples and nations to faith, to **one** family gathered around **one** table celebrating **one** feast in a joy that will never end. The feast that we will receive a foretaste of again this morning, as we eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour, that His forgiveness and light continue to enlighten and live in us. That we too, following in the footsteps of *all* those who have gone before us in faith - that we too may ***arise and shine***.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.