

THE POWER OF LIGHT OVER DARKNESS

(EPIPHANY)

M.I. THE EPIPHANY SEASON IS A TIME FOR US TO UNDERSTAND HOW WE ARE TO BE TOOLS OF LIGHT THAT JESUS USES TO OVERCOME THE DARKNESS OF EVIL.

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The nature of God's light is to reveal the nature and purpose of all things.

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The Power of Light Over Darkness

(Epiphany)

This morning, we are going to enter the church season called Epiphany. Advent started out the church year. We spent the four weeks leading up to Christmas preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Christmas is a time we spend thinking about the humanity of Christ. The church then spent 12 days celebrating Christmas. That's where we got the Christmas song "The Twelve Days of Christmas."

Epiphany means an appearance or a manifestation. Epiphany starts 12 days after Christmas. Technically Epiphany begins on January 6th and will continue on through the beginning of Lent which begins on Ash Wednesday. This year Ash Wednesday falls on March 9th. Christmas focused on the humanity of Christ. Epiphany will focus on the deity of Christ. It starts with the passage of the Magi coming to bring gifts to the Christ Child and it will end on March 6th celebrating the Transfiguration of Jesus. During this period we will study the nature of Jesus, the work of Jesus, and the Kingdom of Jesus. We should use this period to think about the fact that Jesus is our King and we are subjects of His Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is often characterized as light and its mission is to overcome the darkness of the Devil's kingdom. The main theme of the Epiphany season and this morning's main idea is this. **THE EPIPHANY SEASON IS A TIME FOR US TO UNDERSTAND HOW WE ARE TO BE TOOLS OF LIGHT THAT JESUS USES TO OVERCOME THE DARKNESS OF EVIL.**

Let me make just a few introductory remarks before we get into this morning's texts. The readings laid out for the church year alternates every three years. For the most part, each year has its own set of readings. However, for Epiphany Sunday, all three years use the Matthew Gospel reading describing the visit of the Magi. During this church year, the reading from Epiphany will continue with readings from the Gospel of Matthew. The Old Testament readings will continue to be taken from the prophet Isaiah, and the New Testament readings will be taken from the Apostle Paul's letters to the church in Corinth.

I. THE PURPOSE OF LIGHT (ISAIAH 60:1-6)

Now let's get into today's texts. In Isaiah 60:1-6, we are introduced to the purpose of light. Here we see that **THE NATURE OF GOD'S LIGHT IS TO REVEAL THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF ALL THINGS.** This really describes the nature of creation. God created all beings and all things for particular purposes. Everything and everyone functions properly only when we live and act in a way that is consistent with the way God created us. The Bible often describes God as light and Jesus as the Light of the world.

THE ENEMY OF LIGHT (VS 1-3)

In verses 1-3 we are introduced to the enemy of light: darkness. I think that those of us who look at the Bible with 2000 years of Christian history behind us tend to be too judgmental of the people in the Bible. The Jews were waiting for Messiah to come. However, they didn't realize that Messiah would have two missions to accomplish. Yes Messiah would be the conquering King Who will one day rule on earth with His people for a thousand years. However, As described in chapters 51 and 52 of Isaiah, He would also have to take care of the sin problem. I'm not sure that I would have understood that either. That's why we have to understand darkness from the Bible's perspective. For the Jews, the Romans and other empires that conquered them brought darkness. To some extent that was true. However, darkness in the Bible also means hiding from God, not understanding God, or being separated from His presence. To put it even more simply, darkness is sin. Sin separates us from our true purpose, it separates us from God, and it separates us from one another.

Sin is the darkness that covered the earth and still today blinds people from the truth. The doctrine of original sin is this. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, they permitted evil to enter this world and blind people to God's plans and purposes for humankind. Further, Adam and Eve passed on the sinfulness to all their children. We are children of Adam and Eve. You and I were born into this world already in darkness with natures that were bent towards sin. We were born guilty and alienated from God. We journeyed further into darkness by rebelling against God and willfully sinning on our own. All of us are born into this world guilty and headed for hell. Jesus entered this world to fix that problem. We only need to look around at our world to see how powerful the kingdom of darkness is. Again, this is not a battle of human weapons.

Jesus came to destroy darkness on the cross. As we take time to examine how we treat people, what we say to people, what we think, what we desire, and what we do; we realize how dark our souls can be. There are periods of times when I reflect on my life and think about how evil I have been and think of what evil I am continually capable of. It always brings me back to the Gospel. I am overwhelmed by the thought that Jesus died for my sins. I can hardly believe that He would choose to be in a relationship with me.

THE VICTIMS OF DARKNESS (4-5)

Let's press that point and examine the victims of darkness in verses 4-5. Every human being is infected with sin. The Bible is clear on this point. There is no human being that is good. There is no human being that deserves to go to heaven. I know this applies to me more than most. But the fact is that if Jesus did not die for our sins, we would all be on the karma train to hell. I would be on the express train. In some sense we are victims. We inherit sinful natures from our parents all the way back to Adam and Eve.

On the other hand, we often find it fun and pleasurable to give into our sinful human natures. We find it easy to gossip or to answer people sarcastically. It's easy to say unkind things to and about others. It's a good thing that people cannot see inside our minds and hear our thoughts. It's tempting to be dishonest, to cheat, or to lie. It's easy to think about sexual things without anyone knowing. I know that many of us understand this. It doesn't matter how good we look to others on the outside. God sees and knows everything about us. Here is what the New Testament means by living in the light. It is when we humbly come before God and let the Holy Spirit shine God's light on our lives. As we ask God the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts and point out our sins, He will. If we want to escape the darkness, we must first of all reject the pleasure we get from living in darkness and then submit to God's examination of us under the Bible and the Holy Spirit's application of it to our lives.

THE SCOPE AND POWER OF LIGHT (6)

That seems like a tall order but verse 6 describes the scope and power of light. We know that no one needs to live in darkness. Jesus came to die for the sins of the whole world. It doesn't matter where you came from. It doesn't matter how bad or evil you may think you are. It doesn't matter if you think you are not worthy to receive salvation. The truth is that God wants to shine His light on and in every human being. I want to make Jesus' appeal to each of you personally. Listen to what He is saying to you:

"16For God (My Father) loved you so much, that He gave you (Me) His one and only Son, so that when you believe in Me, you will not perish but have eternal life" (paraphrase of John 3:16).

Jesus is the light of the world. He has the power to save you and me. He has the power to overcome the darkness in our lives and set you and I free from the bondage of sin and death. There is no place God's light cannot penetrate and no one God's light and love cannot reach and save. Please remember that because THE NATURE OF GOD'S LIGHT IS TO REVEAL THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF ALL THINGS. You and I were created to love God, to love one another, and to love the lost. If we are letting God's light shine on us and through us, we will be fulfilling our purpose in life. The last verse we studied in Isaiah this morning talked about mentioned people coming from all over the world bringing gold, incense, and praise to God. In the Matthew passage this morning, we once again revisit the incident of the Magi from the East: coming to find and worship Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. During this time in the ancient world, there was a strange sort of expectation among many people, many religions, and many countries that some sort of messianic figure was about to break on to the stage of human history. To be sure the Jews had a high hope and expectation that Messiah would soon come to rescue them.

II. THE NATURE OF LIGHT (MATTHEW 2:1-12)

Matthew 2:1-12 describes the nature of light. SINCE JESUS IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD, WE CAN GAIN SOME UNDERSTANDING INTO HOW GOD OVERCOMES DARKNESS WITH LIGHT. One of the interesting phenomena we encounter throughout the Gospels is this: people who ought to recognize Jesus don't. In fact they often reject Him. On the other hand, people who we think have no way of ever recognizing Jesus or understanding Him end up to be ardent followers of Him.

UNLIKELY RECIPIENTS OF LIGHT (1-2)

In verses 1-2 we encounter some unlikely recipients of Light. We often see this scene as Three Eastern Kings visiting the newborn Jesus. In fact we sing the Christmas carol, "We Three Kings." As we examine the text carefully, we can see that not much in that description is certain. Let's look at the timeframe first. Verse 1 starts out, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem." It doesn't give us any timeframe. In fact from the rest of the story, it seems as if Jesus is about two-years-old at the time. Secondly, we don't know how many of these Magi came. It could have been three, but no number is given. It could have been a small group of people or it could have been a large group. It could have contained both male and female. They were not kings. For the most part, they came from Babylonian, Persian, and Mede descent. They were known as priests, scholars, teachers, astrologers, and physicians. Indeed they were a highly educated and learned group of people. Traditionally people said there were three because of the number of gifts that were presented.

Whole traditions grew up around this and people even gave them names. But the point is that we don't know how many people came. These scholars were from the East and they were priests from Eastern religions. They would certainly not be looking for a Jewish Messiah. Here is what is worth mentioning. A little over 500 years earlier, the prophet Daniel was carried off into captivity to Babylon after the Babylonians captured and destroyed Jerusalem. While in Babylon, Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego became advisors to the king of Babylon. They were well respected and were the subjects of two great miracles performed as they took a stand for the God of Israel. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into a fiery furnace and came out unharmed. Daniel was thrown into a den of lions and he too came out unharmed. Surely stories and memories of their faith were remembered. Perhaps this group of priestly scholars remembered some of Daniel's prophecies. We should never underestimate how our words, actions, and faith can have long-lasting effects on people we meet; for good or bad. That's why if we are Christians, then we should be people who bring the peace, hope, and grace of Jesus to all around us. People should be drawn to Christ by the way we conduct ourselves. However, if we are angry, unhappy, judgmental, big mouthed miserable people, then we shouldn't tell anyone we are Christians. That negativity has lasting effects too. These priestly scholars from the East are very unlikely candidates to

receive the Gospel. However, they saw a heavenly sign sent by God. They saw, understood, submitted, and followed the light.

UNLIKELY PARTICIPANTS IN DARKNESS (3-8)

On the other hand, we are introduced to some unlikely participants in darkness in verses 3-8. When you stop to think about it, they are not really unlikely candidates to reject Jesus. The first person we meet is King Herod. Herod was appointed ruler of Judea by Rome and was king from 47bc to 4bc. He was a very effective ruler. He rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and he rebuilt the Jewish Temple into a magnificent structure. He kept the peace for the most part. When there was a famine in the land, it is reported that he sold off much of his gold to buy food for the common people.

However, he was ruthless and held on to power at all costs. He murdered his wife and three of his sons because he became suspicious they were trying to overthrow him. This is something we must all be careful of. Power, the lust for power, and the desire to hold on to power will cause us to miss or to reject Jesus as Lord. When we are obsessed with power, we are lord of our lives, not God. When the Magi seek King Herod's assistance to find the newborn King of the Jews, Herod sees this as competition and a challenge to his rule and his authority. We learn later that he ruthlessly sent his soldiers to Bethlehem to find and kill every male child under the age of two. Herod had a great chance to bring Jesus into the palace and transition power to Him as Jesus grew up. Proud people have their own agenda. Many even claim to be serving God when in reality they are only serving their own egos and truly rejecting the Jesus of the Bible. So power and pride caused him to reject Jesus.

The priests and religious scholars missed Jesus because of their pride and indifference. The priests and the religious scholars had niched out a pretty comfortable lifestyle for themselves. They were the religious experts and they held powerful and prestigious positions in society. If the Jewish Messiah showed up, they would become irrelevant and out of jobs. They knew the prophecies about the Messiah and even where He would be born. They made it clear to the Magi and to King Herod that Bethlehem was the city they were looking for. Herod believed the Messiah was there in Bethlehem. He sent soldiers to make sure He was killed and never grew up to challenge his rule of Judea. The Magi believed. They traveled on to Bethlehem to find and worship Jesus. However, the priests and the religious scholars weren't even interested. They gave the religious answer and returned to their powerful and prestigious lifestyles. Even though their job was to lead people to Jesus, they had no desire to meet Jesus or even acknowledge Him.

We have met three types of people in this passage and their response to the light of God. Because of pride and power, King Herod opposed Jesus and tried to kill Him. The Jewish priests and religious scholars were indifferent to Jesus' birth. But foreigners came and found Jesus.

LIGHT REVEALS TRUTH (9-12)

In verses 9-12 we can see how light reveals the truth. The presence of Jesus revealed the Jewish priests and religious leaders of the day as phonies. Jesus revealed Herod to be a murderous madman filled with pride and the lust for power. But here it reveals the Magi as true believers. They followed the star to Bethlehem and found the house Jesus and His parents were living. Notice time has passed because now the Holy Family is living in a house. When they saw Jesus, they recognized Him as the Messiah; the King of the Jews. Make no mistake they recognized Jesus as God in the flesh. They bowed down and worshiped Him. Let's remind ourselves we are in the season of Epiphany. Jesus has been revealed to them as Messiah and King of the Jews.

Through their gifts, the Magi reveal the mission of Jesus. Gold is the traditional gift one gives to a king. Incense is a tool of priests as they offer up prayers and myrrh as a spice used in anointing the dead as they are prepared for burial. This is a strange combination of gifts but they demonstrate the mission Jesus came to accomplish. He indeed is King of all creation. He is the High Priest Who offered Himself up as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Not only was He the High Priest; He was the sacrifice. It is only through His blood that we can be made right with God. Jesus is Israel's Priest, Prophet, and King. Listen to the beginning of John's Gospel as He talks about this theme of light and darkness:

"1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was with God in the beginning.

3Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4In him was life, and that life was the light of men. 5The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it"
(John 1:1-5 / NIV).

We can see that God sends light to overcome darkness. Jesus is the light of the world and if we want to live in the light, we must surrender ourselves to Him in faith. **SINCE JESUS IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD, WE CAN GAIN SOME UNDERSTANDING INTO HOW GOD OVERCOMES DARKNESS WITH LIGHT.** Jesus is the One God sent to conquer darkness. If we are believers, then it is our purpose to be reflections of God's light.

III. AGENTS OF LIGHT (EPHESIANS 3:1-12)

In Ephesians 3:1-12 we must remind ourselves that we are agents of light. **SINCE JESUS LIVES IN US, WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO BECOME BEACONS OF HIS LIGHT TO THIS LOST AND HURTING WORLD.** That is something I would like us to focus on as we study the nature of Jesus and His Kingdom during this Epiphany season. Jesus lives in us. People should see Jesus in us

and experience the love of Jesus through us. Listen to this incredible statement from the Apostle Paul:

"9For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority" (Colossians 2:9-10 / NIV).

If God lives in us, then we have this incredible responsibility not to get in the way but to let the light of Jesus shine through our lives. That's how the Apostle Paul felt.

THE NECESSITY OF REFLECTING LIGHT (1)

In verse 1 he talks about the necessity of reflecting light. He said he was a prisoner to the fact Jesus saved him and wanted to save all people. Paul did not want one single person to perish. He was a Jew and yet he wanted people from all over the world to be saved. There is no room in Christianity for prejudices or personal grudges. God wants to reach people of all races, ethnicities, cultures, men and women alike. We are supposed to be God's loving invitation to people to come and receive His love and grace. Does that describe the way we live our lives? I hope so.

THE PURPOSE OF REFLECTING LIGHT (2-6)

In verses 2-6 Paul states the purpose of reflecting light. Verse 2 starts out, "Surely you have heard about the administration of god's grace." The word for administration in Greek is *oikonomia*. We get our word economy from this. It means the running of a household, managing the affairs and assets of others, or simple administration. Think about this. For the most part, before Jesus, salvation and a relationship with God came from the Jewish nation. But listen to what they were charged with. In commissioning Abraham, God said:

"2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;

I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

3I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3 / NIV).

In other words, the Hebrew nation was meant to be a nation of priests who would bring God to all nations. Jews were gatekeepers to faith.

However, in God's new economy through Jesus, the doors to faith were thrown wide open. The great new truth was that those of faith in Israel and all who come to faith in Jesus are all one family. In Jesus' economy, we who are believers are equal brothers and sisters in Christ. We are responsible for

loving one another, caring for one another, and protecting one another. We are family.

THE METHOD OF REFLECTING LIGHT (7-12)

The method of reflecting light is described in verses 7-12. The Apostle never forgot where he came from. Even though his fellow Jews would have looked up to him and revered him, Paul realized he was nothing but a murderer. He never forgot the killing of Steven. Even though he only held the coats of those who killed him, Paul never got over the guilt of that. He considered himself one lucky guy that God would have mercy on him and grant him salvation. Humility is the characteristic that will allow God's light to shine through us on to others. Humility is the characteristic that allows us to remain in a good relationship with God.

It is the characteristic that allows us to remain in a good relationship with one another. Could we say that humility is something we aspire to and demonstrate in our everyday relationships with our husbands, wives, children, parents, friends, and everyone we meet? Could we say that humility is a characteristic we manifest as a church family? If we do then we can have an influence that effects our families, our neighborhoods, cities, states, our country, and the world. More than that, our faith can demolish demonic strongholds and realms. We must always remember that it is not us. We are simply to humble ourselves and let Jesus shine through. If we do not exist to minister to this lost and hurting world as individuals and as a church, then we have no purpose in life. **SINCE JESUS LIVES IN US, WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO BECOME BEACONS OF HIS LIGHT TO THIS LOST AND HURTING WORLD.**

Epiphany is a season of light and revelation. Let me just read you some verses from the Apostle John's First Letter:

"5This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. 6If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. 7But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin" (I John 1:5-7 / NIV).

"8Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in Him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

9Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. 10Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. 11But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him" (I John 2:8-11 / NIV).

As we progress through the Epiphany Season, let's remember this. THE EPIPHANY SEASON IS A TIME FOR US TO UNDERSTAND HOW WE ARE TO BE TOOLS OF LIGHT THAT JESUS USES TO OVERCOME THE DARKNESS OF EVIL.

I am struck the way William Barclay describes the time:

"There is not the slightest need to think that the story of the coming of the Magi to the cradle of Christ is only a lovely legend. It is exactly the kind of thing that could easily have happened in that ancient world. When Jesus Christ came the world was in an eagerness of expectation. Men were waiting for God and the desire for God was in their hearts. They had discovered that they could not build the golden age without God. It was to a waiting world that Jesus came; and, when He came, the ends of the earth were gathered at His cradle. It was the first sign and symbol of the world conquest of Christ."

Take some time to think about the world we live in. People have looked to science and politics to usher in a golden age. But as we look at the world and our country, we can see that people live in chaos and darkness. Politicians don't have the answers nor does science. We have the answer. We have the light of the world living in us. It is a charge to us to let that light shine on to people in darkness by letting the grace and peace and love of Jesus shine through us. Are we willing?