

The Epiphany of Our Lord: January 6, 2019
“Light for the Dark of All Ages”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is our Gospel lesson, Matthew chapter 2.

The Day of Epiphany is really Christmas for the Gentiles. While the Nativity of our Lord celebrates the coming of the Christ-child to the world, it is on this day we are reminded that this Christ was for us also; those not born of Jewish descent. Salvation was for all men, regardless of race. The birth of God in the flesh was witnessed even by the heavens themselves, and the light that marked the birth of Jesus was followed by magicians from the East. While men sat in the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death, the light has dawned.

As I studied through this text this past week, I got to thinking about the Dark Ages. As one studies the history of the Western world, there is a span of just over 500 years, the middle 400s to the year 1000, where there seemed to be little to no advancement in human civilization. The term Dark Ages was first coined in the 1330s by Petrarch who wrote, “Amidst the errors there shone forth men of genius, no less keen were their eyes, although they were *surrounded by darkness* and dense gloom.”

Early Christian fathers have followed the Scriptures, and taken from the Gospel of John using light and darkness to describe “good versus evil.” Petrarch was the first one to give this metaphor a secular meaning and reverse its application. Where this time was once known as dark because it lacked in Christian influence and the position of Christianity in the world, it was now understood as “dark” because of its lack of cultural achievements. In other words, light was no longer being associated with Christianity. We are still living with the fruits of this poisoned tree. Dark and light are not simply understood in Christian terms, but are more often assimilated with cultural influence, or societal growth. For many, light and darkness are cultural words, not churchly words.

Historians often argue about these things. For example, some believe the Roman Empire and its culture constituted the light. No doubt early Christians would have disagreed with that assessment, as the culture of the Roman Empire collapsed under its own weight. Corruption and debauchery, violence and disdain for life were clearly evidenced almost everywhere. Even education, as it had been known in the Roman Empire all but disappeared, even in the Church.

Darkness and light are indeed often confused, but Holy Scripture makes clear that only one can truly be called light. There is only one age that can be called light, and that is the age that is in Christ. It is more accurate to say there is only One who can be called light. There is only One who is light, and Christ is the light for a darkened world.

The star that guided the Magi to the infant Jesus was the first light to come from the manger. As Jesus grew and began His ministry, the light grew brighter and brighter. The light went out first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, to the whole world. The Good News of this Gospel continues to go out into a sin-darkened world.

In a sense, every age can be called dark. The prophet Isaiah describes the darkness that seems to shadow every age: ***“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!”***¹

Darkness is spiritual blindness. Blind, dead, and an enemy of God is the way Scripture describes life apart from God, a life set on descending further and further into the darkness of death. In this sense, every age is the Dark Ages because of sin. Sometimes the darkness seems to grow.

Light and darkness are mutually exclusive realities. They cannot exist together. When you turn on the light, the darkness flees and is destroyed. This is an easy concept to understand. What is hard for the many, is the reality of the Gospel. Many struggle with knowing Jesus is the light of the world, He has dawned upon mankind, and His children still sin. You have been brought into the Lord of Light through baptism, and the Light of Life has illuminated the darkness of your hearts, and bestows upon you forgiveness and eternal life, and you still harbor darkness. You hate and covet. You seek to hurt and selfishly manipulate. You live in the grace of God, while you wait for the full realization of the light. You need to be separated from sin, die to self, and live in the light forevermore.

In this tough two-fold reality of saint and sinner at the same time, many struggle. They falsely claim that perfection happens now, or perfection will never come. In the midst of sin and darkness, there is great struggle to find the light. Many look for light in their own places. They seek for light in what makes sense to them. They look to their own definitions, and disregard the true light itself.

Some blame religion for the many divisions in our world, and it is true that every non-Christian religion bears responsibility for dividing people and keeping them in darkness, because they cannot deal effectively with sin. Even misguided Christians share some of the blame, because they do not understand the nature of the Gospel, but when Christ is proclaimed as the Savior of all people, then there is no division but unity in Him, as He divides the sinner from sin, and unites them together in His own blood.

¹ Isaiah 5:20-21

The darkness of separation and hostility continues in many places in the world, even here in the United States. One of our strengths used to be that we are a melting-pot culture, taking the best of many cultures and making them one. Today, cultural differences are underscored and people of differing cultures are placed at odds with each other, all in the name of political correctness. They complain, “You’re offending me and my culture!” People simply don’t get along.

No government has the answer to such fracturing of society. No government program can change the reasons why people are at odds with each other. No legislation can break down the barriers. Ironically, legislation often exacerbates a bad situation. No human being can fix it. But Christ can. Because He is the Savior of all people, He breaks down the barriers that exist not only between Jew and Gentile but also between Arab and Jew, Asian and African, Republican and Democrat; there is no race or nationality that is greater than another.

Christ came to bring His riches to all people, because all people stand equally in need of what Christ brings. All people, regardless of ethnic, racial, or political stripe, need the forgiveness that Christ brings, because all people lie in the bondage of darkness, sin, and death. Recall the Gospel reading for Christmas Day, ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 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. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”***²

Christmas and Epiphany is the same celebration, just for two different groups of people. Christmas marks Jesus born a Jew in a Jewish city of Jewish parents. He is raised according to the Law of Moses and He fulfills it. He is the fulfillment of God’s promises to have a son of David sitting on the throne forever. His gifts given at Epiphany tell of His three-fold office of Prophet, Priest, and King. Epiphany shouts that this newborn

² John 1:1-14

King is not merely King of the Jews, but the King of all people. He is the Savior of the Jews, and He is the Savior of the Gentiles. The Gospel now goes global with the visit of the Magi! It happened, just as Isaiah had foretold and Paul wrote, ***“This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”***³

Earlier Paul reminded his Gentile readers: ***“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.”***⁴

This is what Christ Jesus accomplished by His bloody death. By removing the sin that separated us from God, He has brought us back to God. Where we seek to enlarge and deepen the darkness, it could not defeat Christ. He brings God to us, and through His blood, unites us with others. Sinners, like you, are forgiven, like you. Isaiah declares, ***“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.”***⁵ Here, today, at Epiphany, we celebrate, the Light – He – has come.

Yes, darkness often threatens to overwhelm the light. It surely must seem that way these days as we see, hear, and read the news from all over the world! The shadows often intrude into our lives, too, because human beings continue to sin. Some continue stubbornly in the pitch darkness of sin and death, empowered by the prince of darkness, seeking to drag the sons of light back into the darkness, but the world will not go back to the Dark Ages—and this is because of the Epiphany of our Lord. The darkness cannot put out the light of Christ, because Christ lives, ***“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”***⁶ Christ has won the final victory over the darkness of sin, death, and hell by His innocent life, suffering, and death.

We need to have that sober view of this sin-darkened world, our Dark Ages. The outcome is not in doubt, but there are many battles yet to fight against the forces of darkness. Christ, the true light, continues to be with us and in us. At the font, He turned on the light in our hearts. He has “enlightened me with his gifts.” Through His Word, He illumines His light on dark hearts. Through His gifts of Word and Sacrament, you, who live in

³ Ephesians 3:6

⁴ Ephesians 2:13-16

⁵ Isaiah 60:1-2

⁶ John 1:5

darkness, are joined to Christ thereby declared to be “*sons of light.*”⁷ Paul urges you to live in Baptismal grace: “*For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true).*”⁸ “*For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”⁹

John writes: “*At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.*”¹⁰

As you walk, drawn by the Light of Christ, just like the magi, His Word feeds you for the way. With joy, we hail its light, and for your journey, what glorious light there is for you in the Supper of our Lord! Here in the Supper is light because Christ Himself, who is the true light, is here bodily for you. Here He gives you Himself as the tangible proof that He has redeemed you, forgiven you, and brought you out of the darkness of sin and death into the light of His grace.

Christ, the true light, continues to shine in ways that the world in its darkness cannot comprehend. But you see the light! You live in the light because of your Baptism! You are children of the light! Indeed, Christ is the light for a darkened world. May you also be part of those who share this light in the darkness of our world. May you share your bounties here in this congregation, so that others here, and around the world, may also come out of the darkness of sin and death and into the light, which is Christ our Lord! On this day we celebrate with the magi,

“As with joyful steps they sped,
Savior to Thy lowly bed,
There to bend the knee before,
Thee, whom heav’n and earth adore;
So may we with willing feet
Ever seek Thy mercy seat.”¹¹ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

⁷ John 12:36

⁸ Ephesians 5:8-9

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:6

¹⁰ 1 John 2:8-10

¹¹ As with Gladness Men of Old LSB 397:2

**Prayer of the Church
The Epiphany of Our Lord
6 January 2019**

Let us pray for the people of God in the Light of the world, and for all people according to their needs. As once the Magi of old came to adore the infant Savior and to bring Him the worship of their hearts, hands and gifts, so do we come this day giving thanks for Your mercy and rejoicing in Your promise kept. Bring the light of Your Word to all who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

You have established Your Church and drawn into her people from every race, tribe and people. Bless all those entrusted with the leadership of the church, and give to all pastors and missionaries the boldness of Your Spirit, that they may proclaim the saving truth of Your Word without fear. Bless those who hear, that they may be brought to faith. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Bring an end to all threats of violence, and raise up for all the peoples leaders who will act with integrity, pursue justice and follow Your commands. Grant to all people the blessing of food, shelter, medical care and safety in their homes, and bless those whose duty it is to protect and defend them. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Guide those who teach Your Word, and fill the classrooms in our churches, schools, universities and seminaries with children, youth and adults who seek to know Jesus Christ. Prosper the publishing of faithful books to teach the faith, and bless the ways in which we may use the gift of technology for the faithful witness of the Gospel. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Give to all people the comfort of Your presence, healing according to Your will, relief of their suffering, and an end to the terrors of mind and heart, especially those for whom our prayers have been requested _____ and those we name in our hearts. (Brief silence.) Sustain the weary with Your Word, the wounded with hope and the dying with peace. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Mindful of Your plan of the mystery hidden for the ages and revealed in Christ, we come together in this place as one people by Baptism and set apart to live out our common vocation of worship, witness, intercession and mercy work. Bless the gifts we bring as You once honored the Magi by accepting gold, frankincense and myrrh. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

With the faithful of every time and place, we give You thanks and praise. Through their example, we are encouraged to fight the good fight of faith. Through the apostles, prophets and all the saints, You have displayed Your saving glory for the benefit of all people. Guard us against the power of doubt and fear and help us endure, that we may be kept among Your sons and daughters who shall see You and be filled with the radiance of Your glory forever. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, our times are in Your hands. Look with favor, we pray, on Your servants *Alka & Millie* whom You have granted another year of earthly life. Grant that *they* may grow in wisdom and grace, and strengthen *their* trust in Your goodness all the days of *their* life; Lord in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

With exceedingly great joy in Your promises and with confidence that You will hear and answer Your people, we commend into Your hands ourselves and all for whom we pray, through Christ, our Lord, whom with the Father and Holy Spirit, You are one God and one Lord, now and forevermore. **Amen.**