

Isaiah 60.1-6
The Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord
6 January 2018
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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How does the song go? On the 12th day of Christmas? And then it's all over. Christmas, that is.

But not the church year. For according to the very earliest tradition of the church, the magi from the East, bearing gifts for the newborn king of the Jews, arrived in Jerusalem 13 days after the Christ child was born. And so the church year rolls from Christmas right into the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord.

But that causes some timeline issues in our heads. For just last Sunday you heard from the Gospel according to St. Luke how the baby Jesus was taken with His mother to the Temple—for her purification and so that, under the Law of Moses, His earthly parents could do for Him what the Law prescribes: a gift to the Lord for their firstborn Son. But that purification would have taken place 40 days after her Son's birth.

So the real sequence of events goes like this: Jesus is born. 8 days later the Lord Jesus was circumcised and given His name, Jesus. His name? "The LORD saves" being given Him at the very moment when He first sheds blood under the Law to redeem those under Law. 5 days later—today, the Epiphany of Our Lord—the magi find the Lord Jesus and bring Him their gifts. And then 27 days later, Joseph will take his wife, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and his adopted Son, Jesus, to the temple. And that explains why they remain in Bethlehem, where they had gone to be included in the census. Bethlehem is but 5 or 6 miles from Jerusalem, an easy half-day journey on foot. Whereas Nazareth, along the trails of ancient Palestine, is some 100 miles away. The magi found Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus in Bethlehem on the 13th day after His birth so that, pious parents that they were, they could fulfill the Law of God.

The words to which we today turn our attention are those from the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 60: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.... A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD."

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

All this talk about camels and young camels. Midian and Sheba. Gold and frankincense? Who uses that any more? It seems so distant.

And it is. Distant in time. Distant in space. Prophecies by Isaiah some 700 years before Christ's birth. Fulfilled at the coming of the magi in the year A.D. 1. First spoken in Judah. Loop closed in Judah. Prophecy delivered. Prophecy fulfilled. Close the book.

But, fellow redeemed: the prophecy is still in its state of fulfillment. For the Word of our Lord stands forever, and this is a prophecy not of a moment, but of an age. Not of just the birth of Jesus Christ in the flesh, but of His continued mission in the world. So that wherever His Word is being proclaimed. Wherever God uses pastors and missionaries to baptize and to consecrate bread and wine. Wherever that happens, this prophecy isn't in the rearview mirror. Nor its fulfillment.

Instead, it is constantly coming to fruition. As it is *right now*. On this Feast of the Epiphany this prophecy is being fulfilled.

For the world is, indeed, covered in great darkness. We sense and feel, sometimes even see, that darkness. It's on the news. It's in hospital rooms. It's in the courtrooms of our country where criminals are tried and where men put asunder was God has joined. You can find it in the loneliness of a nursing home room. In the horror of a diagnosis of cancer. In the deep darkness of clinical depression.

That's the darkness into which we're all born. An impenetrable darkness. One that we cannot get ourselves out of. Not because we can't do a little something about cancer or depression with meds. Not because we can't find some sort of retributive justice for crime. Not because we'll never recover from a divorce.

But because the darkness isn't "out there," it's "in here."

It's like a cold. You can't see the flu when you get it. But you know you've got it when you start to sneeze and wheeze and cough. When you've got a headache and a fever. That's not the flu. It's symptom.

So also all those dark things we feel and experience in life. Those things out there. They're not the darkness. But they tell us we are in the darkness; or rather, that the darkness is within. Hidden away in the soul and breast of every one of us.

And suddenly Isaiah's prophecy doesn't seem so distant. So remote. We're living it. Darkness covering the earth; thick darkness the peoples. Darkness on the outside. Darkness within.

But what Isaiah describes and celebrates and shouts off the pages of his prophecy isn't the darkness. It's the light. It's the great glorious light of the Gospel. The grace that is in Christ Jesus that God heaped upon the grace of Moses and the prophets. The light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome. The fact that in Christ, in a stable, in Bethlehem, in Judah the Lord and God of heaven and earth once and for all penetrates the darkness of our sin-filled world. And comes with His holiness. With a holiness not that to be observed or watched from afar. But with a holiness that He spreads throughout all the earth.

That's what Isaiah is saying: "Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip."

In those words Isaiah addresses the holy church—the holy church whose first members were shepherds from Judah and then magi from afar. The holy church that is radiant not of its own brilliance, but of the brilliance of the One we worship—the God made flesh in Bethlehem, who bears the sin of the world. The holy church whose heart thrills and exults because of the miracle of faith worked in the hearts of countless millions who hear the Gospel throughout the world. And in the midst of her a light. Not her own light. But the light of Christ.

At one point in His ministry the Lord Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today, fellow-redeemed, I can tell you the same thing: today this Scripture is being fulfilled in your hearing.”

Fellow-redeemed: Arise. Shine. Your light has come. For the eternal Word has taken on Himself our flesh. He has touched our sinful flesh with His holiness; swallowed up our darkness in the darkness of His death, and removed from us the curse of sin.

The glory of the Lord has indeed risen upon you!

Amen.

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