

Brothers and Sisters, Ready or Not!

Second Sunday in Christmas - January 3, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Worship Aids follow the text of the sermon, starting on page 6.

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to 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 proclaim the praise of the Lord.

This coming Wednesday is Epiphany, which marks the close of the Christmas season and the coming of the Magi to worship the Christ Child. (I have jumped ahead a few days, and though this is the second Sunday in Christmas we are looking at the readings for the day of Epiphany.) I am well aware that the mention of Epiphany does not generally excite people. With a few hints we then remember that this commemorates the coming of the Wise Men from the East, and we find it a pleasant way to wind down the Christmas season. We may also know that the *day* of Epiphany initiates the *season* of Epiphany which takes us up to Lent. This too does not much excite us, and it has all the looks of a filler season which simply bides the time while we wait for Lent. But let us look again! This season is not designed to help us pass the time until Lent, but to present us with a bold and unsettling truth. Epiphany is a call to move beyond our comfort zones and to serve Christ in new and bold ways. It is a call to action, just as we were settling down to rest after the commotion of Christmas. Let's take a closer look at this special season, and consider the words of the Prophet Isaiah as he tells us the meaning of it all.

Epiphany and the appearance of the Magi is a bold sign that Jesus has come to be the Light of the World! Christmas is much easier for us to grasp, and the opening verses of the Isaiah passage brighten our spirits with a Christmas-like message: *Arise, shine;*

for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. What a delight to hear that Jesus has come to be the Light of the World, for the world we know so well is such a dark place! We have come to celebrate Christmas near the winter solstice for good reason. Now we live in the darkest point of the year, but slowly and surely the light will expand and the winter will pass. So it is with the coming of Christ. The world is darkened by sin which has presented itself in numerous ways – as hatred, despair, bigotry and selfishness. Christ shines as a light of the love and life which only God can give us, and can raise us above the darkness of this troubled world. How I love the lights at Christmas! The psychologists tell us that light can help us overcome the depression which often accompanies this dark season. Long before modern psychology the believer knew the value of the Light to give us hope and chase away despair.

Isaiah proceeds to tell of the coming of the Gentiles to this Light, and rightly we see this as a prophecy of the Magi's visit. *Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.* With the appearing of the Magi, we see the fulfillment of the prophecy and the beginning of the gathering of believers from all the nations of the world. In time, even kings would come to worship Christ. Many have taken this prophecy to mean that the Magi who visited Jesus were kings, but Matthew's account does nothing to support this interpretation. These Easterners were prominent and wise men, but probably not kings.

Little is known of this mysterious entourage, but we do know that artists have had a field day with their wild portrayals of them in painting and sculpture. These visitors are usually dressed in the wildest of garb, and may even look more like people from another planet than from a faraway land. But the point is an important one. They were from elsewhere. They were people from a very different culture and land, and they were there to honor the Christ Child. Theirs was a very quick meet-and-greet kind of visit, but this was only the beginning of something much greater!

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. We have visitors, and many of them! God's people will rejoice at the wealth of people and goods which will be gathered to bless them. The glad prophecy speaks of a jubilant gathering, but the Church has actually been a bit slow in the reception and the jubilating. Christ came to bless people from all nations, but the Church has been notoriously poor in accepting this message. As we read the book of Acts and the account of the early Church, we find people who were always resistant to seeing and accepting God's gathering of those different from themselves. It was hard for them to see and accept that the Good News of Jesus was not only for the Jews of Palestine, but also for Jews from the Diaspora (those scattered around the ancient world,

particularly the rim of the Mediterranean Sea). It was with amazement that they came to see that the Gospel of Jesus was being accepted by Gentiles who had become observant of the Jewish faith, such as the Ethiopian officer in Acts 8:26-40. It caused a complete crisis when they came to see that Christ was calling ordinary Gentiles to faith, and not all were happy about this development.

Jesus is the Light of the World, and this is a difficult lesson to fully accept, especially as we are faced with people who seem so very different from ourselves. "Is Christ really reaching out to those people?" we ask ourselves. We so easily become comfortable with our own people and become resistant to the thought of those outside of our circle becoming believers with us. For several centuries the Church grew across Europe and Northern Africa, and with the discovery of the Americas the Church moved westward. But throughout most of the Church's life we have been lax in the spreading of the Gospel beyond our boundaries. It was only two hundred years ago, with the modern missionary movement, that we have come to see the Good News spreading to the Far East and sub-Saharan Africa. Isaiah tells of a glad day when the Church gladly embraces countless newcomers from around the world, but the Church has not always lived out this calling to offer joyful welcome.

Epiphany presents us with a basic question: Are we ready to greet the world? It is easy for us to criticize the bigotry of the Jewish nation and the early Church, but do we do much better? The Jews of Jesus' day looked down upon the Gentiles as though they were lesser humans. The Samaritans were like separated cousins to the Jews, but they were disdained just as much as the Gentiles. And when the Jews read such passages as this prophecy of Isaiah, they interpreted it to be the Gentiles coming to bow before them and to serve them. Their behavior and attitudes were indeed inexcusable, but are they really so different from us? It is easy for us to look down upon other nations, particularly as they may be poorer than our own or their governments are hostile to ours, but this is not the faith which Epiphany celebrates!

In earlier generations we could more easily ignore the rest of the world, but now the world is at our doorstep. People of many different nationalities have come to work and to settle in our United States. While I was a student at Champ's Barber School in Lancaster, I trimmed the hair of an astounding variety of people. There were white and African-Americans, and there were Puerto Ricans, but this was only the beginning. The variety of Hispanic customers was much broader than it once was as there were Mexicans and numerous Central and South Americans. We had several Haitian customers. Largely due to the settlement ministries in Lancaster I saw folks from Nepal, Bhutan and Southeast Asia, Egypt and several African nations, and the Middle East, Dutch and other Europeans. I estimate that I trimmed over thirty nationalities while in my training. That is quite a united nations of people in one little town! The world has now come to our doorstep! Are we welcoming them? We may argue that we are not being hateful toward them, but this is not much of a boast. Are we reaching out in love? Are we embracing these people? No. We are slow to reach out and

embrace, for they are so different. They may not even speak the same language, and it is so awkward to overcome such boundaries. Our motivation for ignoring these people has little to do with hatred, and much more to do with fear of dealing with the awkwardness of reaching out to others.

Isaiah challenges our fears and reticence to reach out as he speaks of these people as our children and family. *Your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.* The Prophet may have been primarily referring to the scattered Jews who were later gathered after the Exile, but I am convinced that he meant more than just this. People will come from afar, and they shall be your sons and daughters, your brothers and sisters! Our physical genealogies may have no similarities past Adam, but we are family by the blood of Christ. Early in my ministry I asked an elderly woman in my congregation about a person who was seated several pews away. She answered, "I don't know that person. They are not one of my people." She meant no harm, and her reference to "my people" meant that this person was not in their immediate family, but I was horrified to hear these words, for everyone in the Church of Jesus Christ is family. We are family, not necessarily by natural blood, but the even greater bond of the blood of Christ! Can we look at the recent immigrant, the foreign visitor, or the person of a different language or racial group and see them as our family? Let us ask Christ for the ability to do just this, for in Christ we *are* family. They are *our people*.

This appeal for a deeper sense of universal family is not new. It has been preached in churches for years, and our wider society is on a crusade against bigotry and prejudice, so perhaps the real question is how can we actually get some traction for moving in this more inclusive and caring direction? We need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached and celebrated regularly, and we need to let the truth of Christ of all nations soak into our souls and lives. But after that, what practical things can we do to change our thinking and behavior?

One helpful tip which I have learned is to always remember my cousin Ken's funeral. Ken was actually a cousin once removed (my mother's cousin) and was distant enough that his family and mine never really mixed, although in later years I managed to make some connections with Ken – and what a blessed connection it was! Ken had been raised in the faith, but it was in his fifties that he saw Christ clearly and set himself to serving more zealously. He became active in his home congregation, and served beyond that family too. We shared our experiences of the *Alpha* Class ministry, but Ken could tell me of his leading the program in the local prison! Add to all this the fact that Ken was a thoroughly gracious and enjoyable person to know. He died well into his seventies after holding off a liver cancer for many years. We were saddened by his departure, but so grateful for a full life and the hope of glory. The church was packed at his funeral, and what was especially interesting about this houseful was that I knew only a very few of them, but was related to about half of them. In the rich times of socializing before and after the service I shared a glad fellowship with dozens

of wonderful people. Each encounter began with “I’m cousin Charlotte’s son,” and a response of just how this person was related. And if they were “just friends of Ken, and not really related,” I would argue that point and insist that we were family. I could not stay after the service as long as I would have liked, which meant that there were still several dozens of relations which I could not meet. This is the way I need to view the worldwide family of Christ. These are relatives. These are *our* people. We are bonded together by the strongest bloodline – the blood of Jesus Christ – and we have a lot of catching up on each other to do!

My oldest son taught me a lesson in fellowship when he was only four years old. From very early on he had learned to introduce himself and get to know the world around him! One day I had a wedding at the church which was next door to the parsonage. The service concluded and as there was a time gap between the service and the reception, there was a considerable crowd of people in the parking lot, enjoying the sunny day and enjoying each other’s company. My boy looked out at this large lingering crowd and wanted desperately to go out and join the party. We felt it best that he not crash this gathering and insisted that he keep his distance from the crowd. “After all,” we reasoned with him, “you don’t know any of these people, and they want to have a party of their own.” To this our son wisely replied, “But these are my friends. I just haven’t met them yet.” Well said!

Martin Luther King is often quoted in his observation that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America, for he is absolutely correct. It is scandalous just how separated we are in our worship habits, and this segregation goes far beyond mere matters of race. Think for a moment of all the distinctions which separate believers as they each find the most comfortable place to worship. We like certain churches because they offer what we like in regards to age, music and style of worship, just the right programs, size, preaching style, and the list goes on. There is no niche-marketed industry quite as niche-y as the Church! This is beyond sad as we consider our call to be a great mix of all kinds of folks. What’s a believer to do?

How shall we begin to discover and embrace our sisters and brothers of the wider Church? Let us start by recognizing just how comfortably niche oriented we are. It does not take much to make us uncomfortable. We become uncomfortable visiting another congregation, sitting among strangers, being among a different age group, being around those who speak a different language and experiencing worship which is different from our own style. A good start for us all is to become alert to the discomforts we so easily sense, and rather than respond by avoiding those places and experiences, let us learn to *pursue* those initially uncomfortable encounters. Let us learn to “lean into” our discomforts! When a friend says, “You really ought to visit my church some time,” take them up on it. When dining at *Lunch with Luke* (and yes, we will dine again!) go out of your way to sit with someone you do not know and may seem very different than yourself. Make a New Year’s resolution to get to know your least appealing neighbor.

Christ is the Light of the Word, and we need to be celebrating this Light with the world, and not just among our like-minded friends. I close with a lovely and powerful poem and question, given us by Grace E. Uhler:

*For God so love the world, not just a few,
The wise and the great, the noble and the true,
Or those of favored class or race or hue.
God loved the world. Do you?*

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Worship Aids:

A Prayer of Confession:

Gracious and loving God, you have invited us into Your Church which is a world fellowship. Yet we have closed our eyes and hearts to so many of the brothers and sisters which live beyond the bounds of our neighborhoods and comfort zones. As the prophet proclaims: *Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.* God, open our eyes to those around us and to the full scope of Your grace in Jesus Christ. Help us to confess our self-centeredness and shortsightedness, and then let us become more like Jesus.

Assurance of Pardon:

God has promised that we shall rejoice to see people from around the world gather to the Savior. *Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.* In Christ we are forgiven and being made new. Receive this gift of grace, and walk with a heart open to God's transforming work.

An Affirmation of Faith: *The Heidelberg Catechism, #1*

Question: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

Answer: **That I am not my own, but belong -- body and soul, in life and in death -- to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in**

heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me whole-heartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Prayers:

For Epiphany –

Lord Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, help us so to follow You that we may never walk in darkness but have the light of life.

As men were led by the brightness of Your light to come and worship You, illumine our hearts that the veil of darkness and death may be lifted from our eyes and we may see the salvation of our God.

We believe that You are the Word made flesh and that You dwell among us. Use this blessed season to help us see Your glory, the glory as of the Only begotten of the Father, that You may be grace and truth to us.

Increase in us the desire to support with our gifts and prayers the missions to men and women everywhere who have not seen the light, that Your kingdom may ring with praises for You from people of every tribe, nation, kindred, and tongue. We ask it in your name. Amen.

– The Lutheran Book of Prayer

For New Year –

For all the possibilities ahead in this new year make us thankful, O Lord. Give us wisdom, courage, and discernment in the face of so much chaos, despair, and fear. Help us to see how, in our circumstances, we can contribute towards peace, faith and love. And give us the will to translate our desires into actions. – Brother John Charles Vockler

A Benediction:

The Lord bless us, and preserve us from all evil, and keep us in eternal life. –The Daily Office