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St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE (dual parish service w/Immanuel)

The Epiphany of Our Lord

January 6, 2014

Text: Isaiah 60:1–6; Matthew 2:1–12

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It seems appropriate that we begin the Epiphany season in the darkness of night. Tonight's service stands as a witness that darkness is overcome by light. The darkness of evil is defeated by the light of God's grace shining through the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The prophet Isaiah calls upon God's people to "arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (60:1). Tonight, we quite literally had to arise and gather at the corner of 6th & Locust; such is especially true of you folks from Immanuel. We arose in the darkness of this cold night so that the light of Jesus could shine upon us. And what we find is the glory of the Lord shining upon us through the Word and Sacraments the Lord Jesus gives to us. We arise for no other reason than to see the light of Jesus.

But the darkness of this world would try to suppress and hide the Lord's glory. Again, Isaiah says, "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" (60:2). The darkness is pretty thick out there even with all our electric lighting. The darkness Isaiah refers to, however, is not so much the absence of the sun's light, but the absence of eternal life and faith in God the Holy Trinity. Isaiah's darkness is caused by sin and death. They cover all people regardless of age, race, or creed. This darkness cannot be dispersed with candles, LED's, or anything else of man's invention. Only the light of the Lord arising upon you can disperse that gloomy darkness. "But the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you." Divine light and majestic glory are what we look for tonight on this Epiphany evening.

The Wise Men from the east also looked for divine light as it was canvasses across the starry night. They had watched a star arise in the west. It was an anomaly, an outlier from the normal patterns seen in the western sky. These Gentile astrologers

interpreted the star to mean a king had been born. And they too arose to follow the light of that unusual star in order to find a King of special significance.

Their journey fulfills the words of the prophet Isaiah, “And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (60:3). These Wise Men represent the kingdoms outside the nation of Israel including our own United States. Epiphany is sometimes called “the Gentile Christmas.” It stands in glorious contrast to the Jewish character of everything we have celebrated since Christmas Eve. The only Gentile element of the “traditional” Christmas story from Luke 2 is the mention of Caesar Augustus who issued the decree that all people should be taxed. Gentiles didn’t go to the manger in Bethlehem; angels didn’t appear to Roman centurions or even to Greek philosophers.

The light of the glory of the Lord begins shining upon the Gentiles through the supernatural appearance of an otherwise natural appearing phenomenon: a star, a single point of light hanging against the darkness of the cosmos. A great conversation about the nature of this star has been going on since Matthew wrote his gospel. Even in the ancient church there were theologians who wanted to say the star was simply a natural phenomenon, like a comet or supernova. Others were uncomfortable with the idea that the Lord of heaven and earth used the pagan art of astrology to direct the Wise Men to Bethlehem.

In our own day – with its overemphasis on scientific naturalism – many don’t want to consider men being led on a long, arduous journey to a divine Child by a supernatural light piercing the darkness. These various attempts are but the darkness of unbelief trying to snuff out the light of Christ. For if a miraculous, one-time star shining in the western sky is too much to embrace, then how much more difficult will it be to believe that a beaten, starved, and crucified Jewish man was raised from the dead after three days.

This star was of such significance to the Wise Men that they hazarded their comforts and fortunes to determine its importance. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, they boldly ask King Herod, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (Mt 2:2). It’s led us to Israel so the newborn king must be Jewish. Logically, they conclude that the King must have been born to the current king, Herod. The problem was that Herod didn’t have a newborn son at the time. And Herod wasn’t really Jewish.

But the star led the Wise Men in the right direction. Its light was sufficient to get them close. But another, brighter, more accurate light, must guide them to the star's fulfillment. The light of Holy Scripture must be consulted in order to determine where the Christ was to be born. The prophet Micah enlightens the path to discovery, "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel" (Mt 2:6, c.p. Micah 5:2). The light of Scripture provides the sure and certain way to determine the star's meaning.

The Wise Men, enlightened by God's Word, journey the six miles to Bethlehem. They must arise yet again in order to see the true light to which Scripture and the Star proclaimed. And Matthew records that the star guided them to Bethlehem, to the very place where the Christ Child was (Mt 2:9). Was it that the Wise Men were finally able to understand correctly the light of the star only after the light of Scripture shone its bright beams? Yes, I think so. The light of Scriptural revelation illumines the light of natural knowledge and human experience.

Guided by Scripture and the Star, the Wise Men "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (Mt 2:10) until they arrived at the right place in Bethlehem. Did Joseph and Mary's jaws drop as they opened the door and found Gentile Wise Men brimming with big toothy grins at the joy of finding the king of the Jews? The Lord's parents must have wondered at this remarkable turn of events. For the Wise Men fell down and worshipped the Child Jesus and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Mt 2:11). Did Joseph and Mary think about Isaiah's prophecy, "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" (60:6).

On the night of Jesus' birth, angelic light shone across the night sky to proclaim to Jewish shepherds that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem. The light of the Star led Gentile Wise Men to Israel in search of a newborn king. The light of Scripture brought them to THE light that shatters all darkness. In the presence of the light of the world, they worshipped, they believed; they were saved from the darkness of sin and death.

It's a great story, full of mystery, intrigue, danger, and a happy ending. Did we arise in the darkness of this cold, bitter night only to hear a great tale? Heavenly forbid. The light of Scripture shines tonight into our hearts and minds. And through Holy

Scripture, we see the light of Christ. And signs are given to! Sacramental signs that must always be joined to the light of Scripture.

We arose and gathered to follow the light of Jesus. He guides us to worship with great joy, to receive His grace in the signs of His body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins. Those signs are illumined by the light of Scripture which says Jesus is your king, your Savior, your living Lord who drives away the darkness of sin and death.

The light of Epiphany shines this night as brightly as it did to the Wise Men so many centuries ago. A blessed Epiphany to you all. May the Light of Christ shine brightly upon you and yours.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.