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

The Epiphany of Our Lord

January 6, 2017

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.

In the name of Jesus...Merry Christmas to you all!

What is it about light that is so compelling for us humans? We use candles in our worship services as an adornment NOT to fulfill the practical need to provide light for reading the words of hymns and liturgy. Our sanctuary is filled with LED light bulbs beaming out photons at a speed of 186,000 miles per second! And yet, we light candles on the altar and, for tonight's service, candles on our window sills.

Those flickering points of light provide a much more profound service to us, more than illumination for seeing with our physical eyes. They remind us of a much deeper reality, a deeper truth. Light is the realm of truth, knowledge, wisdom, virtue; the realm of God. Darkness is the realm of evil, ignorance, folly, vice; the realm of Satan. Light and darkness are more than metaphors; they are spiritual truths which provide understanding, knowledge, and wisdom.

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). In the dark, coldness of this night, the light of Jesus shines upon us. Not through LED's, but through God's Holy Word and Sacraments illuminated by the grace of the Holy Spirit. We arise for no other reason than to see the light of Jesus, the glory of the Lord.

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 Isaiah refers to is the absence of eternal life and faith in God the Holy Trinity. This darkness is caused by sin leading to death. This darkness covers all people regardless of age, race, or creed. 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. In the normal course of their work – they were astrologers – they had watched a star arise in the west. They interpreted the star to mean a king had been born. And so they 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 annual commemoration and celebration that the Lord Jesus Christ is the saving light of all nations. The Jewish nation was the first to know about the birth of Jesus. But the light of Christ must also be seen and worship by all nations of the world.

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. Matthew simply calls it a star that arose in the heavens.

This star was of such significance to the Wise Men that they hazarded their comforts and lives to determine its importance. This was no pleasure trip. Their overland journey was fraught with dangers upon dangers. A new light has arisen. And the darkness cannot overcome it. This is more than mere metaphor, as they too will discover when they reach the goal of their journey: the God of light and glory revealed in the Christ Child who lives with His parents in a house in Bethlehem.

The Wise Men make a natural mistake when they interpreted the star to mean that a king has been born in Israel. Kings are born in capitals so they go to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, expecting that the current king, Herod, has had a son. Herod doesn't have a newborn son and he isn't Jewish.

The light of the star was sufficient to get the Wise Men close to their destination. But a brighter light must guide them to the star's fulfillment, the light of Holy Scripture. The prophet Micah prophesied centuries earlier, “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 star made sense only after Holy Scripture cast its bright beams upon the hearts and minds of the Wise Men. Guided by the light of God’s Word and the light of the star, the Wise Men journey the six miles to Bethlehem, to the very place where the Christ Child was (Mt 2:9). And so it is that the light of Scriptural revelation illumines and clarifies the light of natural knowledge and human experience.

Upon arriving at the place where the star rested, the Wise Men “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Mt 2:10) for they found the ruler who would shepherd God’s people. 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 newborn 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). I can’t help but wonder if Joseph and Mary thought 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.

The journey of the Wise Men and Bethlehem’s Star is 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? Certainly not. 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 us as well! Sacramental signs that must always be joined to the light of Scripture.

We arose and gathered tonight 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. May the Light of Christ shine brightly upon you and yours as you all live in the light of Scriptural truth, knowledge, wisdom, and virtue.

A blessed Epiphany to you all...

✠ 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.