

A FEAST OF LIGHT

A Sermon for The First Sunday after the Epiphany , 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

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The Propers for the First Sunday after the Epiphany, which use the starred OT lesson from Proverbs and Psalms 92 and 93, have two major themes: Wisdom and Duty. In past years, you heard those starred Propers, and I preached on those two topics. What I want to do today, rather, is to give you an Epiphany sermon; so for today, I chose a different OT lesson from the list of allowed readings and we thus got different Psalms as well. The thing is that the OT lesson you heard today is the preferred choice for the Day of the Epiphany. This choice sheds a different light on the Epiphany, and that will be my topic. Also, some churches celebrate Epiphany on the Sunday nearest to January 6th. We are not doing that, but this is more of a sermon for Epiphany than for the First Sunday after Epiphany.

There are a couple of old jokes I have to tell that most of you have probably heard. They are both groaners, but they speak to our theme. Both involve the same two guys, call them Mike and Pat. Neither one is very bright, and Pat has a drinking problem.

In our first story, Mike and Pat work at a factory. They are working swing shift; it's winter and already almost dark. Pat came to work drunk and saw a cable from a ceiling crane hanging down. He puts some boxes under it, climbs up, grabs the hook, and starts swinging like he's on a playground swing. Once he gets it going, he starts yelling "Hoooo, I'm a chandelier; Hooohoo, I'm a chandelier." Everybody stops what they are doing to watch, and the foreman comes over to see what's going on. When he sees and hears what's going on, he gets somebody to lower the crane hook and grab Pat. He goes over to Pat and tells him, "Pat, you're drunk. Go home. You get no pay for today." As Pat starts to leave, Mike picks up his lunch box and starts to follow Pat. The Foreman calls to Mike, "Mike, where do think you're going? Mike replies, "I'm going home. How do you expect me to work after you took down the light?"

The second one is not much different. Mike is walking home from the neighborhood bar and comes across Pat crawling around under a street light at a corner. Mike asks him, "Pat, what are you doing?" "I'm looking for my coins and my coin bag. I dropped it and all my change spilled out." Mike says, "I'll help you look." After less than a minute, Mike says, "There's no bag or coins here. Where did you drop it? Pat says, "Back there in the alley." Mike can't believe this, "Then what in the world are you doing looking for it out here." And Pat answers, "'Cause there ain't any light back there."

Even with their alcohol dimmed senses, Pat and Mike understand the need for light. To the Eastern Orthodox, the Roman Catholics and to many Anglicans and other Protestants, the Epiphany is the Feast of Lights. Our OT lesson starts with this: [Isaiah 60:1-3 KJV](#) [Isaiah 60:1](#) [Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. 2 For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon](#)

thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. 3 And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

From the beginning of Advent, up through the story of the three Wise Men, our readings are full of images and mentions of light. Only Matthew and Luke tell us the story of Jesus' birth; Mark and John skip over it. St. Luke gives us more detail of the early part of the story. It is St. Luke who tells us of the birth of Zechariah's son, John the Baptist, and of how Zechariah could not speak all during the pregnancy of his wife, Elizabeth; but when John was born, he had asked for a tablet; and as soon as he had written on it, "His name is John", his tongue was loosened and he could speak. Zechariah then gave a prophecy that we now sometimes use a canticle for Morning Prayer. It is not just in Luke 1: 68-79; it is also in your Prayer Book on page 14 and is called the *Benedictus*. In the last two verses of that prophecy, he says this: Luke 1:78-79 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

St. Luke then tells us of the birth of Christ very succinctly in one verse: 2:7, but then, in the next verse, begins to tell us of the angel's announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds: Luke 2:8-9 8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. "The glory of the Lord shone round about them" They could only have understood that glory that shone as light.

But it is St. John in his Gospel who, in the Gospel lesson for Christmas, goes back far earlier than any of the other gospel writers, to before Creation and the beginning of Time to tell us of the essence of Jesus Christ: ESV John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. We read the next nine verses to find out that John 1:14 14 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. The word that became flesh and dwelt among us was Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, who said of Himself, "I am the light of the world." and who now sits in glory at the right hand of the Father.

St. Luke continues with the more direct chronology, first telling us in Luke 2:21 of Jesus' Circumcision and of being given His Name, but then continuing the story by telling us what had to happen 33 days after the Circumcision. Two pieces of the Law of Moses tell us what had to happen next. In Exodus 13:1-2 we read: ¹The LORD said to Moses, ²"Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine." This is repeated again in Exodus and then modified later in favor of the Levites, but the firstborn males still had to be presented to the temple. However, what a woman had to do after giving birth is described in Leviticus 12:2-8, where in verses 2-4, we read: 'If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. ... 3 And on the eighth

day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. 4 Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. We read after that that she has to go to the Temple to make a sacrifice to complete the purification. It is for this reason, that the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary and of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple is celebrated on the Second of February, which is the 33rd day from the 1st of January.

It is at the presentation of Jesus at the Temple that an old man named Simeon saw Jesus, but Simeon was not just any old man as St. Luke tells us: Luke 2:25-32 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, 28 he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 29 "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word; 30 for my eyes have seen Thy salvation 31 which Thou has prepared before the face of all people, 32 to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of Thy people Israel."

Simeon has prophesied that Jesus' ministry will extend to the Gentiles, just as did Isaiah in our OT lesson; and our celebration of the Epiphany is of that first contact between Jesus and any Gentiles, the three "Wise Men" from the East, or as the Prayer Book gives the Epiphany another name, the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. We can conclude that the three Magi did not come to see Jesus on Christmas Day, because if they had, Herod would not have been looking to kill children that were two years old. Herod would have known when the star appeared and about how long it would have taken the Magi to get to Jerusalem, so he knew about how old the child Jesus was. To do what Herod tried to do showed that there was not any light in him – only darkness.

Our language is full of this sort of metaphor: that light is good and darkness is bad, that righteousness is done in the light and sin in darkness. As Isaiah said in Isaiah 5:20 20 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! It is light from God that will guide us into truth and redemption: Psalm 43:3 3 O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles. Jesus has in Him that light of life St John wrote about, and Jesus is the personification of that light, the fulfillment of the prophecy Isaiah gave at 9:1-2 is repeated by Matthew at 4:12-16 in describing how Jesus fulfilled that prophecy when he heard that John the Baptist had been arrested 12 Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. 13 And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - 16 the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned." The great

light seen by the Gentiles of Galilee, a people who dwelled in darkness, was Jesus Christ, in whom was the light of life, the man in whom there was no darkness.

The path that led us to the Epiphany of the first Gentiles coming to see and worship the Christ Child is a path illumined by the Word of God. They came, and they saw the light. St. John in those first 14 verses that comprise the Christmas Gospel, continued after telling us about John the Baptist, by telling us more about the light and its effect on those upon whom it shines. John 1:9-12 **9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.** John, the Evangelist, as much as says that the Gentiles will come to Jesus. Jesus is the Light, he came to His Own people, the Jews, and they did not receive Him, but those who did receive Him get a great reward, one that is unthinkable great, worth more than all the gold in the Universe, the right to become children of God. As St. Paul puts it in Romans 8:16-17 **16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.** As children, then heirs. This brings us back to what we learned in the catechism when we were children: The Question after “What is your name?” was, “Who gave you this name?” for which he answer was, “My sponsors gave me this name in Baptism, wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The faithful no matter what their lineage, Jew or Gentile, are the heirs of heaven all because of the Light that came to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of His people Israel. The Feast of the Epiphany is a Feast of Light, a feast on which we celebrate the beginning of the shining of the light of Jesus Christ on the Gentiles. How long will that light last? Will it ever go out? No, never. Hear what St. John the Evangelist has to say about light in the New Jerusalem in Revelation 22:3-5 **3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it (the city), and his servants will worship him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.**

That is our inheritance, the inheritance of Light, of the light of Christ, to live forever with God, to be able to look upon His face, and not only not die, but to rejoice in it because we are His children. There is an old hymn, not in our hymnal, that puts it beautifully and simply. It says, “**I want to walk as a child of the Light; I want to be like Jesus.**” When we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, a Feast of Light, we celebrate the first shining of the light of Jesus Christ, the light of Truth, on the Gentiles, so let us rejoice with praise and thanksgiving. We know that our Redeemer liveth. Let us walk in His Light.

AMEN!