**INTRODUCTION**

**A. Darkness and Light**

It is about the coming of the light into our darkness. Darkness is what characterizes our lives and our world. Darkness surrounds us and pervades our living. Yet God is a God of light. God dispels the darkness. The light of God enters the world. Some welcome the light. Some are threatened by it and attempt to destroy it. But make no mistake, God’s light conquers the darkness. The theme today is light, the light that dispels our darkness.

God gave these words to Isaiah, “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,” (Isaiah 60:1-3).

**B. Epiphany**

The day of Epiphany will be tomorrow, January 6th. Stemming from a verb that means “to shine” or “to become visible,” (φαῦνω), epiphany is used to refer to Jesus’ appearance, both in the past (2 Timothy 1:10), and in the anticipated future (1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:1,8; Titus 2:13).

The feast of Epiphany started in the Eastern church, principally in celebration of Jesus’ baptism, the moment when Jesus was first revealed as God’s Son, as God said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” (Matthew 3:17). But it also celebrated Jesus’ Nativity, Jesus’ first miracle at Cana (John 2:1-12), and the visit of the Magi. When the festival was
introduced into the Western church in the fourth century, it came to be associated with the visit of the magi. The West already celebrated Jesus’ Nativity on December 25th. We will be celebrating his baptism next Sunday. And we will have to wait until Year C rolls around again in the Revised Common Lectionary to celebrate Jesus’ first sign (Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C).

I find the Eastern church so much richer in its approach to the faith. Why is it that the Eastern church wraps up in one day’s celebration so many events in Jesus’ life: his birth, the visit of the magi, his baptism, and his first miracle? It causes our heads to spin, because these to us were very distinct events that happened at different times and locations. But the Eastern church lumps all of these together. Why? Because they look at the faith theologically rather than historically. The Eastern church on January 6th celebrates the epiphany, the manifestation of Jesus’ glory as God, the occasions in which Jesus first became visible to us, those times in which we finally realized that God’s light had entered our darkness. The Eastern church takes this rich theological approach during Holy Week as well. Instead of historicizing Jesus’ last week and making the emphasis what occurred on each day, the East celebrates one day, the Paschal Vigil, the pageant that celebrates what God’s Son has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection. It is a theological approach. The emphasis is upon the meaning of the events, rather than on the events as historical occurrences. We in the West have much to learn from our Orthodox brothers and sisters.

C. It Is about Light

1. Need to Dispel the Mystery

Focus is so essential today, for it is too easy for us to become distracted. There is much in today’s story that is mysterious and, hence that draws us in and compels us to speculate, to fill in the gaps, to dispel the mystery.

Who were these wise men, these magi? From where did they come? How many were there? What is the significance behind their gifts? Was
there a symbolic meaning to those gifts? So on and so on, we go, carried ever further from the point of the story. We take the story and reshape it into something that satisfies our curiosity, something that meets our perceived needs.

2. Need to Make This A Story about Ourselves

We can also appropriate this story in another way, by seeing it as a morality play. A few believed in Jesus. Yet the religious and political powers were threatened by him and conspired to execute him. How tempting it is, then, to do what we always do when reading the Scriptures. Jesus is thrust into the background and we become the focus of our concern. Are we those who, like the magi, see Jesus’ light and come to him? Or are we like Herod and the religious authorities who reject him? Somehow even our reading of the Scriptures is turned into a little human morality play. It’s all about us. It’s all about us being either good boys and girls or bad boys and girls.

3. God Has Come Among us, Dispelling Our Darkness

No, we struggle this morning to keep our eyes focu sed. God’s light appears in our midst and dispels our darkness. We celebrate the coming of light into our world. We celebrate the Son of God, who comes veiled to us as an ordinary two year old peasant child. We celebrate the fact that, even in his all too human clothing, God is in our midst.

II. BODY

A. Darkness

If we insist upon talking about ourselves, we can do so in only one way. It is to acknowledge the darkness that pervades the world. As Isaiah said, “For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples,” (Isaiah 60:2).

1. Creation Begins in Darkness; God Creates Light

The story of creation begins with a description of nothingness, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,” (Genesis 1:2).
God’s first act was to create light, “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light,” (Genesis 1:3).

2. In Creation, Darkness Continues
We then are told, “And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness,” (Genesis 1:4). What is interesting about that statement is that darkness continues to exist. It exists alongside the light. It’s continued existence is a reminder of the chaos, the nothingness, that preceded God’s act of creation. Our experience is that, even within God’s good world, chaos and darkness are evident and continue as the underside of God’s order. We can construct something, say a home by the ocean, and a storm comes along that damages or destroys that home. We are strong and healthy, and all of a sudden we develop some disease or suffer an accident. The darkness remains. The darkness all too often encroaches and threatens.

3. Darkness and Chaos Threaten Meaning
The continued presence of darkness and chaos in the world are a challenged to any systems of meaning we attempt to construct. The darkness undermines our sense of meaning to the world and to our lives. Any realistic understanding of life must take into account the fact that we are prone to weakness, that we are ephemeral, that we will die. “God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness,” but we must contend with that lingering darkness.

4. Our Turning from God Adds to the Darkness
There is another source of darkness than that which lingers in creation. It is a far greater threat to our sense of order and meaning. It is the darkness to which we create. It is our turning away from the God who is light, as we prefer to live on our own, apart from God, pretending that we are self-sufficient, pretending that we are the creators of life and meaning. The irony is that we actually choose darkness over God’s light. “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil,” (John 3:19).
5. Darkness as Institutions Impose Order on Others

Of course, it is easier to see evil in others than it is in ourselves (see Matthew 7:3). Yet the evil we see in King Herod and in the religious authorities is no different than our own. In both we see the imposing of an artificial order upon others. Herod was a lackey of Rome. Rome had managed to impose by military force upon such a vast territory its own legal and economic systems. It is an order that benefitted Rome, but that was oppressive to others in the Empire. The religious authorities of Israel had a legalistic view of their faith, an understanding that they imposed upon others. It was a system that benefited some, but excluded from society and from God’s presence so many others. Both of these institutions—created to serve god’s good order—contributed to a sense of darkness that pervaded Israel at the time of Jesus’ birth.

In these systems we see the institutionalization of authority and power. This still continues in our day. We experience it in nations and in corporations.

6. The Darkness Arising from Our Individualism

Yet we have see something new develop. It is the autonomy, the authority, the power of the individual. Here it is the individual who is at the center of the universe. The individual decides what is truth. The individual decides his or her best interests. The individual imposes his or her will upon others under the banner of human rights.

7. The Lack of Shared Meaning – Lack of Community – Despair

The issue that arises with individualism is that meaning—that is, shared meaning—disappears. Without shared meaning, all we are left with are centers of power, institutions that impose upon us their own needs for survival and prosperity, regardless of the cost to others and to the environment. Yet there is no shared meaning. Without shared meaning there is nothing that can bind us together in community. We are a consumer culture which means that we will associate with others only as long as our needs are being met. Instead of community, there are alliances. If we begin with the assumption that there is no meaning to life, then there no meaning that others can give us. In fact, any attempt by
people of faith to share their faith is interpreted as an imposition, challenging the autonomy of the individual. The thing is, we as the church buy into this. We are reluctant to share our faith because we do not want to be seen as imposing our faith on others. We need to rethink this. We cannot learn what is meaningful from others, but each of us is told that we must discover for ourselves what is meaningful. And what is meaningful now means that which suits our sense of autonomy, freedom, self-centeredness, and self-interest. True religion curbs these tendencies, but in our culture these are given religious-like sanction. The problem is that meaning by definition is something shared. Meaning is relationship, the relationship that comes from communion with God and that is expressed in the community that shares that faith.

The consequence is that we are left, on the one hand, with expressions of power, and on the other hand, with despair. Each person is cut adrift and expected to either find a reason for being, or else to self-destruct. Despair pervades our culture. It is the darkness that surrounds us and which keeps us simply attempting to live for the moment, but living without hope, living without community, living without meaning.

8. How Much Greater Is the Darkness We Create

When God created the world, God did not do away with chaos and darkness. We must always cope with those threats to life and to meaning. But how much greater is the darkness that we create by turning from God and attempting to live on our own.

B. Light

Today we celebrate the coming of light into the world. In the gospel of John we read, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God,”

(John 1:9b-13).
1. The Light Opened the Eyes of Magi – Worship

That light was reflected by a mysterious star. The magi, the wise men, perceived the dawn of that light. Though they were from an entirely different culture with an entirely different meaning system, yet God opened their eyes to a light being born in Bethlehem. They did not simply acknowledge that light. Rather, they did the one appropriate thing. They traveled such distance to worship, to worship this child who is the light. The word for worship appears three times in this story (Matthew 2:2,8,11). It is hidden beneath a translation of “pay homage,” but it is worship. It is a bowing down before the one light that dispels the darkness of the world, the darkness of our lives.

The wonder is that God’s light, the Son of God has appeared in our world, and that this light opens the eyes of some who then respond in worship.

2. What Is the Light that Is Jesus? - Relationship

What is the light that is Jesus? That light is summed up in one word, relationship.

a. God Is Present in Jesus

The mystery that the magi perceived was that God is present in this young child. God has gone in search of us, much as a shepherd goes in search of wandering sheep. God’s Son has taken on our humanity and enters into creation. God’s Son was born as we are born, lived as we live, suffered as we suffer, died as we die. God does this in person. In Jesus God is alongside us amidst the darkness of this world, the darkness of our lives. In Jesus God shares our humanity. In Jesus God enters into the very depths of the darkness of this world, especially the darkness which is our loneliness, our lack of community, our despair.

To perceive the light that is Jesus is to realize that this person is the living God in our midst. In Jesus we see God as God is. In Jesus we know God as among us.
b. Jesus Reconciles Us to God

Jesus reconciles us to God. The vicious attempt of King Herod to kill Jesus, we realize is only a harbinger of the moment when, as the time is fulfilled, Jesus submits to death and is crucified. Our reconciliation is costly. Jesus not only enters into the darkness of our lives, but takes our darkness upon himself. Jesus is rejected, for our rejection of God is borne by him. Jesus dies, for the death that follows from separating from God is borne by Jesus. Jesus is buried, for we have attempted to bury God and claim this world as our own. Jesus does not simply enter our darkness. Jesus makes that darkness his own. He claims it. He bears its terrible consequences.

In so doing, Jesus fills that darkness with his light, with the light of his resurrected being. Jesus is received into God’s presence.

Jesus, the light, rescues us from the darkness of our alienation from God and restores us to fellowship with God.

c. The Church

Not only does Jesus break down the barrier between us and God, Jesus also breaks down all human barriers. In Jesus a new community comes into being, one grounded in him. Paul spoke of the significance of this community-making by saying that the one seemingly insurmountable barrier has been overcome, the barrier between Jew and Gentile. Jesus creates community. The mystery of faith is that, “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,” (Ephesians 3:6).

In this Jesus breaks into our darkness and creates meaning, meaning which is the fellowship we enjoy with God and in company with fellow believers.

C. The Light Working in Our Lives

Somehow the light breaks through the darkness and opens eyes. This is the great mystery of Jesus who works in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Spirit our eyes are opened to the light shining in
Jesus. In the Spirit we are made beneficiaries of Jesus’ reconciling work. In the Spirit we are made to share in the inner life of God, in the fellowship between Father, Son, and Spirit. In the Spirit we are born again into a community who worships the light that is Jesus. Even when it comes to talking about faith, we are not talking about ourselves, but about God’s continuing work in our lives through the Holy Spirit. In the Holy Spirit our eyes are opened to the light of Jesus.

III. CONCLUSION
A. Light Amidst Darkness

God gave these words to Isaiah, “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,” (Isaiah 60:1-3).

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