

+ Matthew 2:1-12 + The Light of the World Shines Brightly +
+ The Epiphany of Our Lord + 6 January 2013 +

Have you noticed it lately? When the sun goes down, it's been darker in our neighborhoods. Not that the darkness hasn't been there, but from Thanksgiving until New Year's Day, our streets, our neighborhoods, our communities were awash in Christmas lights of every kind—twinkling lights, icicles, inflatable displays, window candles, but now we've returned to darkness. Now the streets are lined with evergreens waiting to become mulch and the last Christmas lights are being unplugged and taken down.

The world returns to the darkness of winter with days still rather short and nights quite long, darkness which around here is only amplified when a persistent lake effect band or a hefty nor'easter blots out the night sky with snow. As our neighborhoods return to darkness, it reminds us of a thick darkness that is all too familiar. This darkness has covered every nation and people since our first parents chose the darkness of disobedience over the light of obeying the true God. The Lord, however, did not abandon his beautiful creation to sin's darkness, but promised the coming of a Light that would shatter the darkness. For four weeks we prepared for the coming of this Light. We rejoiced at the dawning of that Light on Christmas, and today we celebrate because **THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD SHINES BRIGHTLY**

Yes, our world is again descending back into darkness, but the Light of the world shines brightly in spite of the darkness. In fact, no darkness at all can overcome it! ***"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'"***

It was several months after Jesus had been born in a stable in Bethlehem. His parents had settled in a small home there. About this time a group of Magi, scholars from the east, made a long, dangerous trek to the city of Jerusalem to worship this newborn king of the Jews. They had seen a special star in the sky and had come expecting to see a city bustling with excitement at the birth of the new king. What they found was a city too busy with its own darkness to pay attention to the dawning of the Light.

"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." Herod was a ruthless man who had committed unspeakable atrocities during his reign. He was near the end of his life, but wasn't about to let a little baby challenge his power. Out of fear of further bloodshed, Jerusalem sunk deeper into the darkness of fear. In a sense, they feared the Light.

With evil intent in his mind, Herod asked the Jewish leaders to find out where the Christ was to be born. They pointed to a prophecy from the Old Testament prophet Micah, ***"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."*** Herod thought he could use this to snuff out the Light of the world, so he secretly informed the Magi of the Christ's birthplace. With dark hatred in his heart, he told them, ***"Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."*** Herod failed to realize, though, that even his dark plans could not overcome that little Light in Bethlehem. Herod's plans to wipe out Jesus had already failed because the Light of the world was shining brightly.

Jesus had already shattered the darkness of unbelief in the hearts of the Magi. They had been born into the darkness of sin and death, but somehow had come into contact with the writings of the Old Testament. You see, centuries before, the Lord had scattered the Jews from Palestine to Persia (modern-day Afghanistan), and the Word had scattered with them. Perhaps the Magi had discovered the prophecy that ***"a star will come out of Judah"*** (Numbers 24:17), which referred to Christ's coming. Through his Word, Jesus shattered the darkness of unbelief in their hearts with his light of life.

By nature, you and I were also conceived and born into the thick darkness of unbelief. By nature, we're blind with the darkness of materialism or pride or lust or fear or some other sin. All you can do is blindly gratify the cravings of your sinful nature. As you follow your sinful nature you can do nothing, but disobey your holy God and his holy will to live an absolutely perfect life. Every time you disobey God the dark terror known as Death lurks ever nearer waiting to tear you apart body and soul and cast you into the dark depths of hell. What's even sadder is every one of us deserves such a punishment, because by nature every one of us loves the darkness.

...Yet the Light of the World shines brightly in our darkness! When Jesus entered our world as a human child, he shattered our darkness forever. Earlier we heard the Old Testament prophet Isaiah rejoice, ***"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and***

thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.” (60:1-2)

The Light of the world shattered sin’s darkness from a Bethlehem manger as Jesus’ parents laid him on a bed of hay and shepherds came to worship him. The Light of the world shattered sin’s darkness as Jesus overcame the darkness of disease, demon possession, disability and death with his power. The Light of the world shattered sin’s darkness as Jesus revealed ***“the glory of the LORD”*** in the shame of the cross. Then that Light shattered Death’s darkness with Christ’s glorious resurrection from the dead.

Oh, how that Light of the world gives life to our dead hearts and sight to our blind eyes! How wonderful that the Light of the world has even overcome the darkness of our own hearts! That Light of life, however, did not come just for the Jews of Jesus’ day or the Greeks of Paul’s day or the Germans of Luther’s day or even the Americans of our day. You see, even when the bright lights of Christmas shine, our cities, our neighborhoods, our world remain in spiritual darkness. The only way for this spiritual darkness to end is if the Light of Christ shines to every nation and people near and far.

The bright, shining Light draws the nations to itself as Isaiah wrote, ***“Nations will come to your light...”*** (Isaiah 60:3) That Light drew the Magi across great, dangerous distances to worship the Savior-King. Jesus brought joy to their journey as they neared Bethlehem. ***“The star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.”*** Jesus drew these “wise men” to his light through the faith he had created in their hearts. In response, they brought gifts fit for a king to this poor, little boy bouncing on his mother’s lap. They worshiped him as both the King of kings and the Light of the world.

How often don’t you and I fail to recognize what they saw? How often don’t we find ourselves blind to the boundless blessing we have in the Light of the world? How often don’t you and I act more like Herod or the people of Jerusalem towards those who honestly seek the Light, but who end up continuing in darkness because we can’t get past the sinful blindness of our own perspectives or traditions or insensitivity or ignorance? How often do you willingly keep your mouth shut when the Lord provides an opportunity to share his Light with someone of a different culture or background?

Jesus came to shine in the hearts of people from every nation and culture. Through Jesus Christ, each of us was declared not guilty in God’s sight. Through the waters of Holy Baptism and the good news of your Savior proclaimed into your heart, the Holy Spirit worked faith there. Now when the Lord looks at you, he doesn’t see gender or race or social status or family line, but a beloved son or daughter of his family drawn by his Light.

Jesus Christ—the Light of the world—did not reject those Magi who came to worship him. Thank God he does not reject us either, but instead draws us to the brightness of his Light. Now that Light of the world shines to every nation near and far through you and me. We live in a world that’s growing smaller every day and in communities growing more culturally diverse every year. We could talk about what missionaries are doing in far-off lands like Russia and Zambia and Brazil, but the Lord is bringing the world to us right here in America. At no other time have we had more opportunities to do more world mission work right here at home. Multi-cultural mission work isn’t just happening in the big cities of our land, but even here in central New York as people from Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the inner city move into our neighborhoods. Today you and I encounter more people from more cultures than probably ever before as our neighborhoods and communities change.

So what are you going to do about it? You and I could muddle along in the darkness and unplug the Light the Lord has given to us, or with God’s help, each of us could reflect that glorious Light. Our congregation here could become a beacon from which the Light of the world shines forth into this sin-darkened region—shattering sin’s darkness from soul to soul with the good news of sins forgiven and heaven opened. In fact, that’s why we’re here. That’s why we exist—to shine the Light of the world in our dark world.

Even as the last Christmas lights get packed away, let the Light of Christ burn brightly in your heart. Let it shine in your care for your brothers and sisters of every culture. Let it shine in your words molded by Law and Gospel and spoken with Christ-like concern. Let it shine in a love for souls that cares about sharing the Light of Christ with every sin-darkened soul. May that Light burn brightly every day from this place and through every one of us until we join the nations worshipping our Savior in heaven! Amen.