

+ Ephesians 3:2-12 + The Light of the World Is Revealed + Epiphany of Our Lord + 4 January 2015 +

It's a very dark time of year. While the days are getting ever so slightly longer, there's still a lot of darkness. Sunrise is still just after 7:30 in the morning and sunset is just after 4:30 in the afternoon. That means there's still a lot of darkness during the cold winter.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons why this specific time of year is a little more depressing than other times. Not just because of the seasonal "blues," but also because those bright, often beautiful lights that people put up on their homes are coming down. Since last weekend, I've noticed fewer and fewer homes in our neighborhood with their lights still up. Christmas and New Year's celebrations are over. Dried-out trees are going out on the curb. Decorations and lights are getting put away, even here at church, and central New York is hunkering down for another long, cold, dark winter.

In the midst of all that darkness, we appreciate any form of light. Maybe it's the headlights on your car as you drive through some evening snow. Maybe it's the light outside your door that welcomes you home. Maybe it's the warm, pleasant light waiting for you inside when you get home from work or school or wherever you've traveled. When that light shines in the wintry darkness, you appreciate and enjoy the light a little bit more than usual.

The same was true for people living back at the time of the Apostle Paul. They didn't have electricity or gas power. They had fire—torches, lanterns, oil lamps. You didn't have to go far to find yourself in complete darkness. It could be terrifying to live in such darkness. You didn't know who or what might be lurking out there. You certainly couldn't find your way. So any warm, welcoming light was greatly appreciated.

Now what does all this talk about light and darkness have to do with us today? Well, today we celebrate the "Epiphany of Our Lord," the "revealing" of the Light of Christ to a world lost in the darkness of sin and unbelief. We heard about it from Isaiah as he rejoiced at the dawning of the coming Light that would draw people from every nation. We heard about it as Magi, scholars from the East, brought priceless treasures to little Jesus and worshiped him as King. For good reason, then, we celebrate today how **THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD IS REVEALED.**

The Apostle Paul knew firsthand how life-changing the Light of the world could be. After all, Paul had seen that happen in his own life when the Light of the world was revealed to him. Years before he had been known as Saul—an unbelieving persecutor of Christians. Saul thought that if Jesus claimed to be God, then surely he was blaspheming or dishonoring the holy God of Israel. All who followed this Jesus were, therefore, just as guilty of blaspheming the holy God. Soon Saul became obsessed with wiping out the name of Jesus Christ. If that meant arresting Christians or forcing them to publicly reject his name or even giving his approval to their death, then so be it. Saul was so obsessed that he made plans to expand his efforts beyond Jerusalem, but the Lord of grace had other plans.

On the road to the city of Damascus, Jesus appeared in glory and stopped Saul dead in his tracks. ***"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*** Little did Saul realize, but by persecuting Christians, he was attacking God himself. ***"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting... I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you...I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."*** (Acts 26:14-18)

Paul would take the Light of Christ to those lost in the darkness of unbelief. That's what the Lord accomplished through him as he traveled throughout modern-day Turkey, Greece, Italy, and beyond. Paul revealed the Light of the world to everyone as he shared the good news that they didn't have to earn God's favor, because Jesus had done it all for them. Paul reminded the believers in Ephesus, ***"Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation..."***

Paul rejoiced to see how that Light was revealed to others through him. You see, Paul was privileged to share an unexpected secret ***"not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."*** Paul rejoiced to see what happened when the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, was revealed to the Gentiles. ***"...Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."*** That

Light would have an eternal impact on more than just the Jews who came to faith in Christ. Gentiles who had been wandering in the darkness of unbelief would come to see that light as well.

For good reason, Paul was amazed at the grace of God through Christ. No longer would God's promises be restricted to his Old Testament people. God was pouring out his grace on people of every culture, nation, language, background, social status, and education. The Babe of Bethlehem had come to bring peace between God and the human race, not just a specific demographic. Jesus had lived perfectly under God's holy Law as the Substitute for all people. Christ had been crucified for the sins of the whole world and conquered death for all people. Now in Christ and through faith in Christ, ***"we may approach God with freedom and confidence."***

Paul was amazed at what God's grace was doing as the Light of the world was revealed, but are you? Do you always rejoice in what God accomplishes through the good news of our Savior Jesus? Do you sometimes forget that our God in his grace didn't just reveal his Light to you, but for everyone else? Do you sometimes ignore how undeserved God's love is in that he allowed his Light to change the lives of every one of us here today?

Only because of God's undeserved love, do we see how special the Light of the world really is. Consider how God revealed that Light to you. God guided your life to bring you the Gospel, to send the Holy Spirit to create faith in your heart through the hearing of his Word, and then to give you free and total access to your God as he comes to you through his Word and Sacraments.

The story of how God revealed his Light in your life is just as marvelous as Paul's. No, God didn't appear to you in a bright vision on the highway, but perhaps he used faithful parents or a loving friend or an inviting pastor or a God-fearing spouse to reveal his Light, his grace in Christ Jesus. Isn't it stunning to consider what the Lord accomplished to reveal his Light to you?

Since the Lord revealed his Light to you through the Gospel, what else can you do than share that Light with those you know and love? By grace, we see it. By grace, we rejoice in it. By grace, we share it. That was what the Lord had sent Paul to do. ***"I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things."***

Doesn't it strike you as odd that this great apostle would describe himself as ***"less than the least of all God's people"***? How could someone who once persecuted Christians be qualified to reveal the Light of the world? He certainly didn't deserve to have that privilege to share ***"the unsearchable riches of Christ."*** Yet that is what's amazing about grace—that God would take a filthy, sinful enemy and transform him into a faithful servant, who couldn't help but reveal Jesus to people lost in sin's darkness.

When it comes to revealing that Light to loved ones lost in the darkness, we often think we're ***"less than the least of all God's people."*** "Who am I to reveal the Light of Christ to others? I'm a sinner and God knows what I've done. Even if I could, I still have fumbling, stumbling lips and I'd probably say something wrong. I'm not theologically trained. Besides I couldn't face rejection. Let someone else share Jesus." Such excuses come from your sinful nature. It doesn't want you to reveal God's Light to the world. It doesn't want you to take the time and effort to share Christ with a loved one lost in darkness. Your sinful nature doesn't want you to see what Christ does in the lives of people. After all, look what that Light did in your life!

Yes, by nature, we are ***"less than the least of all God's people,"*** so maybe you and I need to spend more time soaking in his Light. In the coming weeks, you'll see that Light revealed again and again. That Light once shined in a Bethlehem manger for shepherds to see and on Mary's lap for wise men to worship. We'll see that Light revealed on the shores of the Sea of Galilee as the Savior lives a perfect life for you. We'll see that Light revealed in a dark and unexpected place—on a cross, where the Savior gives his life for you. We'll see that Light revealed in a tomb that the Savior has left empty because he conquered death for you. We'll see that Light revealed as Jesus rules all things for your good even now and forever in heaven. We'll see that Light of Jesus revealed in our darkness.

Yes, we may have a long, cold, dark winter ahead of us, but in Jesus, we have a Light that shatters the darkness in our hearts and shows us the path to heaven. Rejoice in that Light and what Christ has done in your life. Then share that Light as God reveals his love to the nations through you! Amen.

