

The Secret's Out

Text: Isaiah 49:6; Ephesians 3:6

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Isaiah 49:6

"The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body... through the gospel." Ephesians 3:6

If someone says to you, "You Christian people really shouldn't celebrate the festival of Christmas because it's a pagan festival rooted in ancient paganism," you could say, "That's right. We know it," and just blow them off. Well, don't do that. Be gracious. Be matter-of-fact. On this Epiphany Sunday, or the Sunday after Epiphany, we do celebrate what once was the pagan Festival of Light.

Originally, the birth of Jesus was celebrated on January 6. There is a long history that I won't go into this morning, but eventually with Constantine, the emperor in Rome, and the Roman calendar having the winter solstice at December 25 (that point at which the sun is farthest from the equator when it stops going away, and shortening the day when it is coming back and lengthening the day), the ancient world celebrated the Festival of Light. In order to have the birth of Jesus celebrated apart from the January 6 date, the ancient church began to celebrate Christmas on December 25. And then, after the twelve days of Christmas, comes a celebration of the visit of the magi on the 6th of January.

We have concocted this calendar. It bears no semblance to reality. We don't know those dates, but in the ancient church and in the liturgical tradition of the church, what we have done is celebrate what we believe, in a series of festivals. We believe that "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." Mary had a baby and that child was visited by shepherds and by those from the East, called wise men or magi, and on this particular Sunday, the first Sunday after Epiphany, we remember that the one who was born was the Light of the world. Epiphany. The word means *manifestation*, and it is the celebration of revelation. It is the celebration of the unveiling of God when the light of God shined into human hearts. Epiphany is the season of revelation. From the visit of the magi, we have the symbol of the star. And from the star we have the symbol of light.

We celebrate at this time the fact that the light has come and shined into our minds and hearts. We become illumined so that we behold the mystery of God - that mystery that otherwise would be cut off from us. In Christian theology or Christian doctrine we talk at the season of Epiphany about revelation because we do not believe that God is at our disposal. God is not at the end of some human syllogism in logic or some scientific investigation. God reveals God's self, and Epiphany from the Greek word meaning *manifestation* celebrates the fact that God has not left us in confusion or darkness, but God has made God's self known to us. That is what we celebrate. Epiphany is about revelation - the sudden brightness of the landscape of the mind or of a society or culture, when suddenly someone or people together say, "Oh, I see—Oh, we see."

Colette and her teachers in our Worship Center have used the idea with the children in the phrase "Epiphany Eyes." Epiphany Eyes are eyes that see through or see something that was always there but not seen. It is a delight to hear a child talk about Epiphany Eyes. It is seeing—really seeing that which before was not seen at all. It is that sudden revelation—light dawns on one. One says, "Oh, I see. Suddenly, I understand." With Epiphany Eyes, however, we need to be careful that we don't identify the revelation with the eye, for truth is not in the eye of the beholder. The Epiphany Eye is the instrument that is gifted by God to illumine, to give understanding and knowledge. To be illumined by God is to be transformed by God. Salvation is all about coming to dwell in the light of God's presence and to experience that presence as reality. So we enter again into that season when we worship and adore the God who has made the divine reality present to us. Now we see. The Light has come.

Israel at its best understood that it was called by God, gathered by God to be the instrument of light to the nations. In the original call to Abraham and Sarah, it was not a call to the exclusion of the rest; it was a particular call to a particular people on behalf of the rest. "In you all nations of the earth will be blessed." By and large, Israel forgot that. By and large, Israel did not live up to being a beacon light to the nations. But in the Hebrew Scriptures there are those universalistic notes. I read one of them a moment ago, Isaiah 49, one of the servant poems in that section of Isaiah's prophecy. The servant is called by God to bring light to the nations, so God says, "My salvation may be experienced to earth's farthestmost bounds." There was that insight at that point at least in Israel's history through this prophet or writer that the light of God—the light that had dawned on Israel—was not to be put under a bushel, but was to be brought as a beacon to the nations so that all people might celebrate in the light of the God who had created all things. Most of the time Israel missed the point.

Paul (or Saul as he was called then), for example, narrow minded religious fanatic—a real classic bigot, was on his way to Damascus to stamp out the followers of The Way, when the Light dawned upon him and cast him to the ground. He said, "Ah, I see. What would you have me do?" He became, in his own understanding of God's calling, an apostle to the Gentiles. Or to translate that

Greek word equally well (I prefer it) an apostle to the *nations*, for Gentiles were simply all of those who weren't Jews. So, Paul understood himself as one called an apostle, a sent one, to the nations. In this third chapter of Ephesians, which is a fascinating passage really, Paul begins to say he is going to pray for the people of Ephesus. But after the first dozen words, he interrupts himself to begin to talk about this amazing thing. It takes him way down to verse fourteen to get back to where he started in verse one. In the meantime there is a big parenthesis about this light that has dawned. Paul, Jew, exclusivistic, an adversary of those who were other, threatened by Jesus, ready to stamp out those followers, had an Epiphany experience and become the apostle to the nations. In writing to a congregation, which he founded, he is still all thrilled about this amazing, mind-boggling revelation. He says, "The mystery was made known to me by revelation." A little farther on he says,

"In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind that has been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the spirit, that the Gentiles have become fellow heirs—are the members of the same body, share in the promise of Christ through the Gospel."

Then he goes on with another paragraph. "The boundless riches of Christ be made known through me to make everyone see what is the plan and the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things." He doesn't talk about God as redeemer, he talks about God as creator, because he is talking about the first principle, if you will; he's talking about the ground of all reality. He says, "The amazing thing that I have discovered is that the creator of the cosmos has shined light on all humankind." He said, "For generations this mystery was hidden. We didn't understand it. But now, through me, by revelation of the spirit through apostles and prophets— now we have a calling to announce to everyone: 'The Light has come, and that God is the God of all people.'" That simply amazed Paul. He was going his own way with intention and deliberateness and he got turned around in his tracks and came back 180°. The Church has understood that people, and therefore, the Christian movement has been a missionary movement.

In the historic Christian missionary movement, this has translated as, "The Light has come and now salvation is available to all people, and if you will repent and believe and be baptized and become part of the Christian movement, then you become a Child of the Light. The historic Christian mission in the wake of this amazing revelation has understood its calling to be Light to the nations, as the servant in Isaiah's prophecy understood himself to be a Light to the nations - to bring Good News to the whole world. The Great Commission says, "Go into all the world and preach this Good News," and we have done it, proclaiming this as a possibility. We have done the Christian mission in a kind of "if/then" basis: *If* you will believe, if you will be baptized, if you will repent, if you will become one of us, if you will turn around, change your life, *then* you are a Child of the Light

I wonder though if there is not another way to understand that revelation to Paul, that revelation that occurred through Jesus Christ, our Lord. I wonder if, rather than offering salvation as a possibility, if we might not offer it as a reality, as an accomplished fact. I wonder if the historic Christian mission had it right, in understanding that the Light must be proclaimed and shared, bringing people around into the Christian movement, or if the Christian movement might not have been that privileged people upon whom the Light dawned who were called to announce to all people that the Light indeed has come; that the Creator of the heavens and the earth is the God of all humankind. I wonder if we might not have gotten farther and made the world a more peaceful place, for we know that our world is torn apart by partisan, sectarian, religious commitment. We know today, a couple thousand years after Paul, that religion is perhaps the most dangerous force afoot in our world. I wonder (Sometimes I think I have had an Epiphany), rather than saying to all of those out there whose culture and religious background and training and conditioning prepared them not all to receive that Light as I have received it. I wonder if I would not do better simply to say to them, "Relax, the Light has come and it shines on you as well." It seems to me that that would be another way, legitimately, to understand the early writings of the New Testament. Paul had to struggle against his own day, against that Jewish opposition which saw itself as exclusively the people of God. When Paul wanted to say those people can experience the grace of God without becoming Jews, they said, "Oh no." Paul said, "Oh yes." Paul said,

"For us it is through Moses, but for them they don't have to come through Moses. Don't lay on those people all of the structures and forms of our Judaism. Let them come to God by grace alone."

Paul won the day at that time. I wonder if he were here in the year 1994, looking at the world situation, seeing the great religions of the world - Islam, Judaism, Christianity, the Eastern religions - I wonder if Paul might not have another Epiphany experience. I wonder if he might not say, "Oh, I see, it is bigger than ever I dreamed. God the creator of the heavens and the earth is the God of all people, and while for me I see the light of God in the face of Jesus supremely, I see that God honors the serious and sincere quests of all."

I think that's what the story of the Magi was about. These were Persians. In tradition we call them "the three kings." They probably were astrologers, priestly types. They studied the stars. They found the revelation of God in the heavenly spheres. They saw a star one day. They had a yearning for God. They followed the star. They were led to Jesus. They brought gifts. Traditionally again, we have made them the first Christian converts, but as a matter of fact the story doesn't say a word about that. It says they brought their gifts and went back to their old country, no doubt rejoicing in the fact that the light of the star had led them to this significant moment, celebrating the fact that those who truly seek God will surely find God. Epiphany is about revelation, about suddenly saying, "Oh, I see."

I received a letter from the Middle East Reformed Fellowship. This is a group that broadcasts the Gospel into the Middle East. It is a three-page letter that says that the communist threat is gone. Thank God, for forty years we had that enemy over against whom we could define ourselves. But this letter in rather frightening terms describes the new enemy. It is Islam. Now that the Soviet Union is unraveled, these people are free and they are distributing the Koran, they are rebuilding their mosques, and there is a revival of Islam. On the board are some of my colleagues in this appeal. This appeal says send us money so we can broadcast the Gospel because Islam is the enemy. There is a quote from the *Wall Street Journal*, which says the onslaught of the modern world has kept the Islamic people confused, humiliated, poor and intensely angry. They hate us with an energy and fury that is beyond reason. This appeal invites me to join the offensive. If I will send \$50 for one year they will send me a bi-monthly report called "An Intelligence Report." Do you catch the military parlance? There's a holy war, folks. Christians are being called to holy war against this revival of Islam. The threat that they speak of is a people who have been humiliated, robbed of their human dignity, made fools of by the rest of the world, a people who are furious, full of anger, ready for violence. I understand that. I should think that they would be.

So, what will I do? Preach the Gospel to them quickly, make them Christians so I can take away their anger and make the world safe? Or, if it is true that they are full of anger, if they are furious, if they are humiliated, if they have been robbed of their dignity, if the Islamic world is ready to rise up, might I not better go and embrace them, they who worship more devoutly than I do the God of Abraham? Might I not simply share with them the Light, that together we are children of the Light, and that the creator of all is the God of us all who would have us all be together in one human community. I want to tell you, when I read this stuff and this is the stuff with which I might once have identified, I'll be honest with you, when I read it I want to say, "How could I have ever believed that?"

It's kind of an Epiphany experience. I see it so differently now. I see that in the Christmas miracle, God the Word that became flesh dwelt among us - Light came into the world. The message was that God loves the world, that God is for people, that God wants people to be in human community, and wherever there is that hunger and yearning for God there will be a star that will appear, or an angel that will sing. I want to stand in solidarity with all of my brothers and sisters however they see the Light, because I know the Light is a Light that shines far more brightly than my particular view of it. I know that Light transcends my understanding. I know that Light is the Light of God who is a God who would have that Light be for all nations.

Epiphany is about the dawning of Light in the darkness of this world—not the aligning of people in adversarial camps, but the calling of people to a common worship of the one true God. Ah, friends, the Light has come, the news is so good it should set our feet to dancing and our tongues to singing. The wonderful thing

about the Epiphany miracle is that not only was God manifest and the Word made flesh, but the Light continues to shine in the darkness, in your darkness, in that moment when there is deep yearning and longing within your soul. The promise is the Light has dawned and the Light will shine, and grace will touch your life, for God is with us.

You see, for long ages, Paul said that mystery wasn't known, but now the secret's out and it is a better secret than we've yet dared hope for. It is a dream of a God who holds the whole world in his hand and lifts up the light in his countenance on all those that lift their eyes in longing for the touch of grace. That's Good.