

The Best Is Yet To Be

Epiphany Sunday

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-7; Revelation 21:1-4, 22-27; Matthew 2:1-12

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

On this Epiphany Sunday, I want to make a bold declaration that the best is yet to be, the best is yet to be in terms of the cosmic journey and the human story. Obviously, that is an affirmation of faith which is beyond verification, and yet, it is an expression of the trust that we have as a people of faith, as the people of God.

It is possible in any given present moment to be paralyzed by the darkness. It is possible in this present situation in which we find ourselves as a nation to be paralyzed by the shock of September 11. In your insert I had printed a piece from *The New York Times* of October by David Kennedy, which, when I read it, I thought was good to give me perspective, and I thought it might give all of us perspective. It is a piece that I will not read, but simply refer to, for he makes the point that the nation was very jittery, very uncertain, full of fear and trepidation in the wake of that shock. And then he goes on to remind us that we have been there before, that the darkness has been there before, that the fear and the uncertainty have been there before.

He points, first of all, to Pearl Harbor to remind us of those days, and yet, as I thought about that, I realized that one really has to be on Social Security in order to remember that. So, there are a couple of generations who would not be able to refer back to the anxiety, the angst of those days. But to be reminded that in those days there were German U-2 boats off our Atlantic coast sinking our shipping, that provocateurs were landed in Florida and New York, that on the West Coast they were so fearful of a Japanese invasion that they cut off radio signals, they moved the Rose Bowl from Pasadena to the Carolinas, and, with one of the dark blotches on our history, Japanese-Americans were incarcerated out of fear and suspicion. And then he goes on to remind us of those Civil War days and Revolutionary days, and the fact that there has been darkness before. There has been fear and uncertainty before, and he concludes with a positive statement about the resilience and the creativity of the people of this nation, and I thought on the first Sunday of a New Year, on Epiphany Sunday, it might be good to be reminded that the darkness has always been with us, but that the Epiphany

theme, the light has dawned upon you, the light has visited you, is a word that we might well meditate on and contemplate as we try to put our present experience in perspective; for there has been darkness and the announcement of the light is not a denial of the darkness, not a denial of the harshness, brutality, the violence and so much horror that has marked the human story. No, the announcement of the light is a statement in face of all of that, in spite of all of that. It is a statement of faith. It is an expression of hope, it is grounded in a deep trust.

In John's Gospel, as he tells the Christmas story, we have those famous words of the word becoming flesh, and in that context he says the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it. And so, this morning, I want to weave a little biblical thread, a little biblical tapestry for you which is witness to that constant confidence of the people of God in the light that has shined and will never be extinguished.

In the Advent series I did not use the words of Isaiah 9:2, but we did read them in the late service on Christmas Eve and you will recognize them immediately: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." That was the eighth century Isaiah. He is also the one in the eleventh chapter who spoke about the shoot from the branch of David who would come to judge with justice and equity and who would bring about that state of things where the lion and the lamb would lie down together.

And there was second Isaiah who picked up those themes. He is now in the exile situation in Babylon where the people of Judah had lost their faith and had tended to move toward the gods of the Babylonians, after all they were the victors. And that prophet began with the words made famous by Handel, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people," says your God. "Say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God.'" And he is the one who spoke about the return in all of the glory and brilliance and brightness of those passages.

The people did return, but it wasn't all so bright and glorious, and so, third Isaiah, in the context of those first waves of refugees returned, had to encourage them again. He said, "Arise, shine, for your light has come. The glory of the Lord has shone upon you." He makes reference then to the nations coming to Jerusalem, the wealth of the nations being brought into the city, and the kings of the nations bringing their gifts, from which, of course, Matthew borrowed the picture in order to tell the story of Jesus, for after third Isaiah and his encouraging words, there was a period of drought and darkness, frankly.

And then, Jesus is born and the impact of Jesus causes Gospels to be written and Matthew, in telling his story, goes back to Isaiah and uses that name from Isaiah, *Emmanuel*, God with us, and he borrows the picture of the kings bringing the wealth of the nations and he tells about the Magi who followed the star who came to adore and to offer their gifts.

That was written, you have to understand, after Good Friday. So, he was aware of the fact that the darkness had come on with its unnerving power in that darkest of all afternoons when the son of God was crucified. But it was post-Easter, you see, when those gospels were written, and the post-Easter church was convinced that the one who was crucified was not dead at all, for they experienced his presence and his power and his life throbbing within their life, and so, when they told his story, they told the story of the kings coming with their gifts and the star bright with light because they believed in that vision which they borrowed from third Isaiah and second Isaiah and first Isaiah - that hope of Israel that had come to expression in many ways and forms through many prophetic voices.

Then, of course, the persecution set in and in that little Jewish Jesus movement, there was one John, who was exiled for his faith to the Isle of Patmos, and on the Lord's Day, in the Spirit, he received a vision, a vision of the new Jerusalem, and once again, speaking about *Emmanuel*, *God with us*, God with God's people, and borrowing from Isaiah 60, he speaks about the Holy City glorified, and the gates of the city always open, and the temple there, and no night there, for the Lord God was the light of the city, and the kings of the earth brought their wealth. So, you have a whole tapestry, a biblical tapestry from the Hebrew scriptures through the Gospels through that picture of the consummation of all things and, running through it all, is that wonderful assurance that the light has dawned and the darkness would never overcome the light.

What do you think? Is it just wishful thinking? Every time a historical epic was entered into with hope and light was announced, it seemed to come to nothing. Oh, those prophetic voices gave hope to God's people, and that's no little thing. People of God were encouraged and they were lifted in their spirit and they did go on. As a matter of fact, the dream never died, and that is not without its significance. But, I wonder - is it just wishful thinking? Is it what it ought to be, what the best of the human imagination wishes and imagines it could be, but finally the old world just keeps grinding on its way by power and might, greedily acquiring wealth and seeking preeminence?

It is interesting, isn't it, that the dream was always dreamed by an insignificant rag-tag remnant of people. Can you imagine thechutzpah, the audacity of that dream as it came to expression from Isaiah? Who were these people, anyway? They saw themselves as living in the navel of the earth. Goodness sakes, all of the nations were going to come, they were going to flow into Jerusalem. There's a prophetic theme we speak of as the exultation of Mt. Zion. Mt. Zion would be lifted up and all the nations would flow to her, and she would teach Torah. She would teach God's law and God's truth. And in that prophetic vision, as beautiful as it is, there is talk of righteousness and of justice and of peace. There is a portrait of human well-being, human community. But, it's always dreamed by those who have not a prayer of effecting it or implementing it, and old Isaiah in the 8th century was wrong. Second Isaiah was simply wrong. Third Isaiah was wrong, and Matthew was wrong, and the Revelation of John was wrong in terms of history having entered into some ultimate

point where the light would flood and scatter the darkness. We're two millennia beyond that. So, the dream has been alive for nearly three millennia, and it's always been dreamed by a rag-tag remnant of folk who may well be right, but have not the power to make it right.

How could they keep dreaming it? Well, they believed in God. They believed in a God beyond the stars who at some point would intervene and would effect what had been promised. They believed in a sovereign Lord of history that would bring all things to its consummation. And, if I were to preach to you this morning the way I preached for many, many years, and the way I suppose these passages are preached in 99 and 44/100% of the Christian pulpits of the world, then what I would say to you is, "Wait. Hold on. Keep on hoping. Keep on praying for, though the times move on and the reality never comes to realization, nonetheless, trust God. It will be so. Let us pray."

I can't do that anymore. I don't want to be just one more voice saying one more time all of those same old things and send you forth saying it was good to be there. Nice sermon. Because, you see, I don't believe that some God beyond the stars is going to come in and fix it for us.

Is it just wishful thinking? Is there really nothing to it, then? No, I want to say to you this morning that I believe in the message of Epiphany more than ever I have in my life. I believe that Jesus is the light of the world more strongly than ever I have in my life. I've preached all these things in traditional fashion and believed them, but I never believed them strongly enough, because I never felt existentially gripped by the fact that, my God, Jesus is the light of the world. The difference now is that I come to see that, the light having dawned upon us, it is incumbent upon us to make the light come to its realization in human well-being. I realize now how true it is that the light has dawned upon us. We have seen the heart of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has mirrored God. Jesus Christ has mirrored a God crucified. Jesus Christ has mirrored a God who wins by losing. Jesus Christ has shown us the way.

But, we have not followed him. We do not need more light. We really know, and one of the blessings of the tradition of which we are a part – rooted in the Hebrew prophets and the Greek philosophers and Roman law, Western civilization – one of the great blessings of this grand tradition is that we have come to see that which allows the human spirit to flower and to flourish, and we know that which constitutes human well-being. But the problem is that those who have dreamed the dream have never been able to implement it, because they've been the rag-tag remnant of humanity, the minority report always, a voice crying in the wilderness. How could the dream possibly keep alive? Well, as I said, they believed in God. But, more than that, the dream is true! It touches the deepest reaches of the human soul. It's true! We know it's true. The New Creation where there's not a child that will die in infancy and an old person die without the fulfillment of years, where people will plant gardens and eat the produce thereof

and build houses and be able to dwell in them, a land where they will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain. We know that is true.

If only a super power, if only a super power believed the dream. A super power, for example, that had amassed power and was willing to yield it up, had amassed immense military might and was willing to lay down its arms, had amassed vast economic resources and would use those to turn the earth into a garden. Then that dream would not be so fantastic. Then that dream would not be so unrealistic. Then it might be possible to effect the dream and to implement the vision.

You see, the dream is true. The dream didn't tumble out of heaven somewhere. The dream was placed by the Creator Spirit in the depths of the human heart. The dream has lived on through all the darkness because, finally, that dream will never be defeated. Finally, that dream will continue to obtrude itself upon human consciousness, until finally somewhere, sometime, some people make it happen. And, in the meantime, to live in the light of that dream, in the meantime to have our own behavior affected by that dream, in the meantime to be the earners of that light and that life.

Ah, one could grow cynical. One could despair. Suddenly the war on terror takes second place to the war on the economy, for the son learns from his father that it is the economy, stupid. And so, all of the engines of power will be turned on in order to regenerate this monster that we have created which is not our servant, but of which we are slaves. One could wonder if it can ever be. And yet, the dream won't die, and there have always been a minority of people who have believed that the best is yet to be. A people who have kept the dream alive, who refuse to quit, have refused to be silent. Maybe in the long run, if we really want to take the long-range view, maybe a million years from now, they will look back on us and say, "You know what? That was the childhood of our species." Maybe it takes millennia but, whatever it takes, we dare not deny the dream, for the light has dawned upon us and we are people of the light and to live in the light is to live even in the darkness humanely and to know the mantle of God's grace.

Is it just wishful thinking? Or, is it time for us to do something about it?