

Light of the World

Text: II Corinthians 4:6

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Epiphany I, January 10, 1993

Transcription of the spoken sermon

For it is God...who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. II Corinthians 4:6

We have come to celebrate the fact that light has come into the world, and to wonder at the mystery of that light, which for some becomes the light of the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and for others seems to be not light at all. This is the season in which we point to our reality that light has come into the world, that God has been revealed, that God has been unveiled, that God has made God's self accessible and available, and comprehensible and apprehensible to the likes of us. And yet it is also the season in which we wonder about the mystery of why it is that some believe and others believe not at all – or, to wonder even further, why it is that *we*, who are exposed all our life to this mystery, if we are honest must say that we have never fully sensed the dawning of the light. For you see, in this celebration in this season of the year we recognize a double act. On the one hand light has come into the world, but on the other hand the critical personal question is, “Has the light dawned upon me? Have I seen the light?” There is always that double edge. It is one thing to celebrate that the light is here, and it is another thing to wonder at the mystery of the dawning of that light on our deepest selves. It is not enough simply to affirm that the light has come; it is essential finally that I can say, “I have seen the light.”

The Apostle Paul tells the story of Epiphany in his own way, out of his own experience. Had I read a Gospel lesson this morning, I think I would have read the first chapter of John, the prologue to John's Gospel. The prologue to John's Gospel might well be called the Christmas Epiphany passage, because in that passage John calls our attention or makes a connection between creation and the coming of the light in Jesus Christ. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and all things were made by him and apart from him was not anything made that was made.” That light was coming into the world, and John affirms in the fifth verse of that first chapter, that that light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not comprehended it. So John connects the coming of light with the creation story.

In *Time Magazine* last week, on the 28th of December, the cover asked the question, “What Can Science Tell Us About God?” The cover story dealt with that question from the aspect of the physicist who probes deep cosmological secrets. It’s an interesting article. It’s the kind of thing that *Time* usually does at the end of the year, maybe at Christmas and Easter, tipping their hat to the spiritual realities of the world. But, in that article, it recounts the fact that centuries ago there was an Islamic scholar who spoke about the fact that the darkness would have been just preceding the brilliance of light, and that all of reality would have been contained in a mere speck prior to the creation.

In the *New York Times* this past week there was an article about some further confirmation of the “big bang” theory, that all of reality - the whole cosmos, the whole vast expanse of the cosmos – was at one time just a knot of energy tightly compacted, and that the “big bang” was the explosion, that nuclear-type explosion that created the cosmic reality that continues to this day to be expanding. There was some further verification for that theory, which I have to admit, goes over my head. But at the end of it all, the authors of the article say that agnosticism is still a pretty good scientific position to take, but atheism may not be as valid as once it might have been. One hundred years ago with the onrush of the natural sciences, it seemed as though God was just going to be moved off the map, or off the globe. But after a hundred years of intense scientific inquiry, there are some very profound scientists today who would say, “You know, there is a curtain there and if you haven’t been able to look behind the curtain, then it’s rather presumptuous to say that no one is home.”

Well, the creation in this description is so complex; it is such a mystery that it challenges the best minds and causes them to stand in awe of the complexity of life from its molecular structure to its very complex arrangements. The creator hasn’t really been ruled “out of court” yet in terms of the best of science that’s out there. The creation of light. There is even an article in the *New York Times* this week about the discovery of a huge invisible mass that they have been looking for, a mass that would indicate - which would give some confirmation to – the theory of the “big bang” as the way it all began. One scientist read the read-out from a computer and said, “Well, if you are a religious type you might say you are looking at God.”

How did it happen? Who knows? But, if there is something to that “big bang” theory, then, with the coming into being of all of this cosmic matter, there would have also been the explosion of light. We know now from our probe into outer space that it is cold and dark there but, in that moment of creation, poetically the Genesis writer says, “And God said, ‘Let there be light.’”

There must have been light, blinding light, if that “big bang” has any credibility about it. And that light, the light at the beginning of the natural world, is for John and for Paul, an analogy of that Light that explodes within the mind and heart of the human person who comes to see the brightness of God in the face of Jesus

Christ. That is what Epiphany is all about. It is the celebration, the dancing before the Light that has come into the world. The good news is that the Light has come into the world. Just as surely as the natural light was indicated when God said, "Let there be light," just so surely in the face of Jesus Christ – so says John, so says Paul, so did they witness and testify – there is now light to enlighten our human experience, our human lives. Light in the natural realm, but also light in the personal realm through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul says, "To look into the face of Jesus is to look into the heart of God." I like that passage. I think it says it beautifully, brilliantly: that in the contours of the life and ministry of Jesus we see into the depths of the nature of God. And when Paul speaks about this light, he is, of course, telling his own story.

We read that story in the book of Acts. Paul, a Jew, serious and devout, committed to the way of Israel, cognizant of the threat that was placed before temple and law in the ministry of Jesus, set about to exterminate the Followers of the Way. He tells us that it was about noonday, somewhere on the way to Damascus, that he had a vision - saw a bright light - was thrown to the ground, blinded. For Paul it was that dramatic and that vivid. For Paul indeed it was like that initial atomic explosion at the creation. It was a blinding flash, and he was blinded and, led on into the city, he prayed, and finally one was sent to him and we read it was as though the scales fell off his eyes. That's the way it is. The blinding flash of physical light that blinds one is analogous to the blinding flash of insight into the truth. Paul's experience was that out of which he spoke and out of which he ministered for the rest of his life. The light had dawned upon him, for you see there is a double aspect that we must reckon with in Epiphany. On the one hand, the light shines and Jesus is the light of the world, and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. But the other side of the coin, the completion of the circle, only comes when one says, "I have seen the light." Paul could say the Light has come, and I was blinded by the light, the light shining in the world, and suddenly I saw the Light.

It is interesting when you think about that, because it wasn't as though he was some pagan, a reckless, careless, unspiritual individual, of which the world is full, of course. That wasn't the case with Paul. It wasn't the case with Paul that he was following some false God. He was following the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of covenant grace, the God of David and Moses. He was the son of Israel. But suddenly the Light struck him and everything changed. His world got turned upside down and redirected. Strange how that happens isn't it? In the context of the passage in Corinthians, he is defending his ministry. He often falls under attack, and has to give an account of himself. He is doing that in this letter, and, in the course of saying, "I have carried on an authentic ministry, an honest ministry. I set forth the truth before the common conscience of my fellow men and before the face of God," he hears the objectors say, "But not all believe." And that is a mystery isn't it? It is a mystery that you could be sitting here this

morning and the one next to you believing fervently and you in all honesty having more questions than certainties.

Paul tries to explain that. I am not very satisfied with his explanation. He says, “Well, to be sure not everybody believes, but if one doesn’t believe it is because they are blinded by the god of this world.” Well, I don’t know, Paul. From a preacher’s point of view, that gets me off the hook a bit. In other words, if I make sense to you and the Light dawns, it’s because there is a connection here, but if nothing happens then the failure must be that Satan has blinded your heart, your mind. That whole conception of the universe peopled with spirits of darkness is a little strange, frankly. I don’t think of my world that way, do you? Maybe I’m naive, but I am not as ready as Paul was simply to explain the one that believes as opposed to the one who doesn’t believe in terms of devils going about blinding people.

Our Reformation forbearers tried to explain the phenomena of belief and unbelief in terms of God’s predestinating, electing grace. That ought to send chills up and down your spine. I don’t believe that either. Thank God. Double predestination: the fact that somehow, in the mystery of God’s counsel, you are chosen, you are damned. Poof! You know our forefathers and foremothers believed that? That you didn’t really have a chance. If you were elected you had had it. And if you weren’t, you had really had it. That was, frankly, a theological scheme by which to explain why one believes and one doesn’t.

How would you explain it? Here two people sit. One believes. One doesn’t. They hear the same stuff. They eat the same meals. They watch the same television. They go out into the same world. One has faith. One doesn’t. How would you explain it? Because you see, it is one thing to say that the Light has come into the world. That is our Christmas gospel; that is what we celebrate. The Light shines in the darkness, but have I seen the Light? Well, I like to think that maybe it’s not so much explained by little spirits of darkness pulling curtains over hearts, and I certainly don’t think that somewhere in eternity God decided to choose you and leave me out.

I think it has a lot to do with our human experience, don’t you? Some people in the midst of their human experience are so broken and scarred that it seems almost impossible for them ever to trust. Some people never having been loved find it impossible to love. Some people never having experienced the embrace of forgiveness find it impossible to forgive. Some faith has been shattered on the shoals of human suffering. Some faith has been ignited in the midst of suffering. Suffering doesn’t necessarily turn you one way or the other, but it can still turn you. I could give you instances of those who suffered deeply and came out with strong faith. The Psalmist said in retrospect, “It was good for me that I was afflicted.” But I could show you other people who suffered deeply, who are cynical and full of despair, and for whom the ongoing religious life is hollow and empty. Human experience has a lot to do with it.

I like the way we are nurturing our children at Christ Community. In this season of the year they are being taught to cultivate “Epiphany Eyes.” Because it is not only Epiphany, the manifestation, the revelation, the turning on of the light, but it is the eyes to see and behold. It is to create within us that expectation that we will be apprehended by the Light and we will have the Light dawn upon us, that we will see the Light. The cultivation of an expectation creates within us a readiness and an openness for it. I think it is good also to remember as we wonder about these things - why one believes and why one doesn’t, or why there was one time when your experience was warm and enriching and now it seems rather distant and cold - that the Light shines and Epiphany happens not simply once. There may for some be the dramatic turn-around of an Apostle Paul, but for most of us, here and there, a ray breaks through in a deeply moving experience, times when suddenly we feel, as Wesley expressed it, “How our hearts strangely warmed.”

Oh, it’s a mystery. I wish I knew how to throw the switch. I wish I knew how to trigger it for you. I can do no more than Paul advised. Giving up all kinds of manipulation and any distortion of the word of God, simply commending the truth before the common conscience. Before the common conscience of humankind and before the face of God, to set forth this story that the Light has come into the world - that in the face of Jesus we see into the nature of God and that can be trusted. And some Sundays you walk out of here and say, “That really got through to me.” And some Sundays you walk out and say, “Could have better gone to brunch.” And sometimes it’s me. But, as often, it’s you. What you bring. What you anticipate. What you are looking for, and what you need.

Oh, I wish I could take all of you on occasion and shake you, take you by the nape of the neck and say, “Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? Are you questing? Where are you? What are you doing? Where are you going? Are you doing more than just going through motions? Is your faith, your devotion, more than just hollow ceremony and empty form? Is there some passion? Have you been touched? Has the fire burned brightly lately?”

The Light has come. The Light has come. The Light shines in the world. Jesus said, “I am the Light of the world.” And in the face we see to the heart of God. But the face of Jesus isn’t available for you. Where finally then in your human experience will you find the Light shining? Well, I suppose, to drag out an old saw: If I can’t see it in Jesus’ face any more, then you are the only face I have in which can be mirrored the face of Jesus, that is a mirror of the heart of God. It’s a Mystery all right! And we do make a mystery of it I suppose. We carry on our theological discussions and we split our doctrinal hairs. I suppose, finally when I look into your face and know I am accepted, finally when I feel your arms around me and know I am loved, finally when I look into your eyes and know I am forgiven, finally when you touch me, the Word becomes flesh, and then it is not the objective reality alone that Jesus is the Light of the world. Then it is that Light that floods my soul. It is in the encounter one with the other that Epiphany

happens today in the ongoing community of those who stem back to the Word made flesh, the Word who was the explosion of Light revealing the One who in the beginning called forth an explosion full of light.

The Light has dawned upon us. Thank God.