

Light of the World

From the series: A Millennial Vision

Text: Isaiah 49:6; Matthew 2:9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Some weeks ago, as I was thinking about this morning, contemplating the beginning of a new year, the beginning of a new century, the beginning of a new millennium, I thought, "Dear God, I ought to have something profound to say," and nothing came. But, I did think long and hard about it, realizing that this is a rather significant time.

The human calendar is a human calendar; it's a human construct. It doesn't have anything to do with the divine plan of anything, the cosmic reality. It's simply something that we've put together, but it's a handy item. It is a good instrument. It enables us to get the sense that life moves and that history unfolds and that there is development. And the calendar gives us a way to mark time, to mark the seasons of our lives. It gives us a chance to evaluate where we have been, the extent to which we've accomplished our dreams and our goals, and it gives us a fresh start, an opportunity to set again those goals that we might go after and to have a sense of that which is beckoning us. And so, while the calendar is a human construct, nonetheless, this is a significant time. There aren't many of our brothers and sisters in the human family who ever get to experience the turn of a millennium, and so I thought to myself, "What are the critical insights that we have gained, that we need to actualize, to implement? What are the important matters before the human family, before the Christian church, before the religions of the world, and how might we set for ourselves a vision for the third millennium?" And because this Sunday is also the celebration of Epiphany, I thought, "Why not think together about the light of the world?" It is the symbolism of the star that points to the light that led the Magi to the adoration of the Christ child in Matthew's story.

The word Epiphany comes from the Greek language meaning manifestation, and in this congregation your children speak about Epiphany Eyes, that is, eyes that are able to see through, to see deeply. Epiphany has to do with seeing with insight. Epiphany Eyes are eyes that see, not was not there, but what was always there and not seen or understood, and the Festival of Epiphany is the celebration

of the fact that it is the Christian Church's witness that in the birth of Jesus light came into the world.

Matthew tells a delightful story of those Magi who saw a star rise in the east and followed it until it led them to Jerusalem where they consulted with Herod the King, and he with the religious leaders, as to what this bright star might be because such a heavenly body would often, in the eyes of the astrologers of that time, signify the birth of some royalty, some ruler of the world. And so, Matthew prefaces his story of the life and ministry of Jesus with this delightful story of the Magi who follow a star that leads them, finally, to the stable where they worship and where they praise God.

Where did Matthew get the story? Well, interestingly, if you would read the 60th chapter of Isaiah, which would be a good Hebrew lesson for a day like this, you would find, "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn. A multitude of camels shall cover you and your camels of Midian and Ephah, and all those from Sheba shall come and they shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." Of course, Matthew simply dipped into his Bible and he found there a promised one who would be thus worshiped and adored by kings who would bring gifts. And in order for Matthew to give expression to what he believes Jesus to be, what he believes to have happened in Jesus, out of his own biblical tradition he tells us a story. There probably was such a bright light around that time and there probably were conversations about what the brightness of that heavenly body should signify, but all of it is put together beautifully by Matthew who wants to say in Jesus, the child that was born, the light of God came into the world.

John also, in the prologue to his Gospel, mentions light coming into his world. This was the light that enlightens everyone coming into the world. And in John's Gospel, he even has Jesus say, "I am the light of the world." But, even in John's Gospel, it's obvious that John recognized that the light that is in Jesus was a light that pointed to a greater light beyond Jesus. Right? Follow me? Even in John's Gospel where we have such a bold declaration, "I am the light of the world," even there it is obvious as you read that Gospel that John is aware that that human, historical manifestation of light was a beacon and a pointer to the true light that transcends all. In other words, even John did not absolutize the light that was in Jesus as a light synonymous with the Light of the world.

Wilfred Cantrell Smith, who was one of our great scholars of this century, studied comparative religions, going back a thousand years. I find it rather interesting on this first century of the third millennium that he went back to the first century of the second millennium and he identified five leading exponents of five religious traditions. In his study of their work he says it was obvious, in the case of all five, that all five of them had experienced God. They had an intuition, they had an insight, they knew there was this Ultimate, this deep Mystery, and then each of

the five in their own way sought to express what they had experienced. The insight or the intuition was one thing. The expression was another. And so, this common experience of coming into the presence of that Absolute Mystery that is the ground of all being and the source of all life, this experience came to expression in five different traditions.

Smith, in his book, *Faith and Belief*, said the first experience is *faith*. That is the *experience of God*. But, *belief* is the religious system that we create in order to stammeringly and stumblingly point to that ineffable experience of the One who was Light Inaccessible. And then Smith points out, interestingly, that each one of the five who gave particular expression to that common experience, each one of them was aware that when they had said what they could say, they had not said enough. Each one of them indicated in the very nature of that which they shared that they knew that there was more which was beyond their capacity to share. They could intuit it, they could experience it in the sense of being overwhelmed by a Presence, but when it came to giving expression, articulation, to put it into words and sentences and concepts and ideas, each one of them recognized that they were falling far short. They were not doing justice to the depth of the experience. To translate that into Christian terms, what that means is that Jesus for us is the light that reflects the Light, but the light that is in Jesus is not the absolute Light that is over all and beyond all.

Epiphany is the time when we think about that Christian idea of revelation and for revelation to be revelation, something has to be revealed, something has to be communicated. And for something to be communicated, that communication has to be context-specific. For example, right now I am talking to you in English. Many of you would say, yawning, "It sounds like Greek to me," but nonetheless, I speak English, I speak in ideas and concepts that we have in the interchange, in the intercourse of our lives. It's the only thing I can do. It wouldn't do me any good to speak Latin to you. We talk about these things that are common to our experience in a particular context because, being human, we are historical. That means we are limited to a time and to a place and we can only communicate with one another in the specificity, the particularity of our particular situation. Jesus was that particular word of the infinite and eternal God who came to expression in Jewish flesh in a child, in a Hebrew prophet, revealing that God beyond all religious concepts. Jesus is the light of the world for us because Jesus is our way to the experience that we have had of the Light of Lights.

I like Paul's way of saying this better than Matthew and John, frankly. Paul said in the second letter to the Corinthians, the fourth chapter, 6th verse, "We have seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God." That's the big One. "We have seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." In that historical, time-limited, race-limited, language-limited human flesh of Jesus, in the particularity of Jesus we have seen a glimpse. Now, of course, historically, what the Christian Church has done is to absolutize that historical manifestation as though that was all, the end all and the be all, as though that historical

manifestation was synonymous with the big One, and all you need is two different religious traditions to absolutize their own particular story and you have the seeds for conflict, and the possibility for violence. Nothing can fuel human conflict better than religion because it's right at the heart of our being, it's the thing we cherish most. The religious commitment of our lives gives us our sense of identity and, when you rattle that somehow, you create great conflict, great struggle. But, that's what we did. We took the particular manifestation that is ours, full of light and grace, and we said, "That is synonymous with the whole," and, of course, to say that was to exclude all the rest.

Wilfred Cantrell Smith said that a thousand years ago there were Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist thinkers who were perfectly content with the experience of God they had which came to expression in their particular traditions, but they didn't realize that they were parallel traditions because they weren't aware of one another in a human situation where there was not this global mobility and CNN everywhere, satellites in the sky, and all of that. But, we know different. We know. We can see the origin and the source of all of these religious traditions. We can watch the development. We can see their claims and understand the articulation of that experience of the Ultimate. As a millennial vision, I would hope and pray that increasingly the Christian Church would also recognize that its grasp, its glimpse of the Ultimate filtered through the face of Jesus is true! But, there's more.

I did a little research last night because I remembered an experience I had that was one of those life-changing experiences. I had been fussing around with the breadth of the grace of God and I had been including more and more people from the narrow little beginning where I began. And then some of us, ten years ago, 1990, traveled to Europe and we made a stop in Paris and took a trip outside of Paris to that magnificent cathedral at Chartres. There's a guide there, an Englishman named Malcolm, who gives fantastic lectures on that cathedral. He's lived in the shadow of it for years. He took us around and for the first time I realized that the great cathedrals, the stained glass of the great cathedrals, were really the libraries of these communities. This was before the time of the printing press; it was before the time of near universal literacy. And those stained glass windows told the significant stories of the human story. Particularly in the cathedral, they told the biblical story so if you came into the nave and looked to the west you would see the story of Creation in stained glass. If you went on to the transept, you would see the development of Israel, and perhaps in the depths of the choir you might see the birth of Jesus, the Christmas story, and perhaps in another transept the Crucifixion and then the Resurrection. This was a marvelous way to inform the people of the story. They had no Bible in their hand. They could see the story. I thought to myself as I was in the cathedral, and I told you this ten years ago, October 14 1990, in "A Place to Stand in a World of Religions." I told you this story how being in that cathedral I thought to myself, "What if, what if there were a people who only looked through the windows in the west wall of the nave? What if there was another group huddled in the transept, in the choir, or in

another transept, in another part of the nave, people who didn't move out of their locale, who only knew there was light streaming through a particular part of the story? The only part of the story they knew was Creation or Christmas or Easter, or whatever it may be. Would they not think, 'That's it! That's the story.' But it wouldn't be the story at all. It was a chapter of the story. It was a facet of the story."

And then I thought to myself, "What if they were not all Christian groups, but what if there was a Jewish window with the community of people seeing the light stream through and a Christian and a Muslim and a Buddhist and a Hindu? What if all of these respective groups were gathered before their windows where the story was told, their story? And what would be the common thing that would bind them together? Being unconscious of one another and without knowledge of anyone else's story, what would be the common thing? Well, it would be the light that streams through all the windows, that illuminates all the stories."

And it was then that I saw a paradigm of that Light of the world which is greater than the light of the world that dawned in Jesus. The light that dawned in Jesus is an authentic and true light of Light Inaccessible. But God is Light Inaccessible and in the mercy of God, Light Inaccessible became light focused in a human face. And that's my story. And it's a true story, and through that story I have experience of that Light Inaccessible. But, so do my brothers and sisters in other respective traditions.

I thought that was a rather good paradigm, a good model, a good symbol, a good story I told you. In fact, it was so clear that everything went downhill from that point, because it made so much sense, it seemed so obvious, and one way or another I've been hammering away at that and once in a while I get weary. I get weary about being so concerned about the things that don't concern many people. It's tough to be "strange," to see ultimate importance in things most people yawn about.

I must have grumbled about that a couple of months ago, mentioning that maybe I was growing tired of it and one of my astute listeners wrote to me and said that she had been thinking about that often of late, and then one night she saw on public television, perhaps some of you did, as well, a documentary on Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, these two war horses that led the women's suffrage movement, and she said, "I was overcome by a deep sadness when reminded that from the time of the convention in Seneca Falls when the whole idea was affirmed, accepted, when it seemed as though everyone would say "Yes" to women's suffrage, it was 72 years before the Constitution was finally amended and the suffrage actually happened," and my correspondent says, "Susan B. Anthony gave virtually all of her adult life to that struggle, and Elizabeth gave much of hers, as well. What can one say but, 'Why? Why does the right thing take so long?'"

So I am counseled by my correspondent when I grow weary, because Susan B. Anthony never even saw the passage of the amendment for which she had given her life. So I am counseled when I grow weary to remember the ladies. They stirred and stirred until they created a wave of women who filled the streets with banners and songs and, at the end of her life, Susan said, "With such women consecrating their lives, failure is impossible." And then my correspondent writes, "People are listening. The waters are churning. Minds are opening. Thank you for making CCC an exciting place to be, something of an Imagination Station for all ages, and when you are tired, remember the ladies."

An Imagination Station for all ages -I love that. And it's happening, and it will happen, friends, because people are hungry all over. They're not hungry for all of the ecclesiastical structures and the baggage of institutional religion. But they're hungry just like the Magi were hungry and took off on a journey following a star. People are still and again looking to the stars, looking here and there and everywhere for some authentic word, something that resonates to the depths of our humanity. It will happen, this millennial vision of a world at peace. As the Catholic theologian, Hans Küng has said, "There'll be no peace among the nations until there is peace among the religions," and I have a millennial vision of a time when all of the religions will respect each other and enrich each other and teach each other and live together, hand in hand, in the harmony that alone can reflect the Creator's purpose. It will happen.

What happened on New Year's Eve? From the far South Sea Islands, around the globe, in our own living rooms and kitchens, as a human family we celebrated the turn of the millennium. Has there ever before been such an event celebrated by the whole human family around the whole globe, celebrating all together the movement from the second to the third millennium in such a world? Let us rejoice in that light that has come to us in Jesus Christ that points us to Light Inaccessible and join arms and hearts with all of those of good heart who, likewise, have experienced the eternal and in their own way and own manner bring praise and worship to the eternal God.