

How Do You Respond When Truth Dawns on You?

Text: Isaiah 49:6; Luke 2:32, 34-35

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...I will make you a light to the nations, to be my salvation to earth's farthest bounds. Isaiah 49:6

...a light that will be a revelation to the heathen... Luke 2:32

...This child is destined to be a sign which men reject...many in Israel will stand or fall because of him...the secret thoughts of many will be laid bare. Luke 2:34-35

How do you respond when Truth dawns upon you? That is the question posed by the title of the message. The question needs some explaining.

"When Truth dawns upon you," already says something about my understanding of how we come to a knowledge of Truth – insight into the deepest levels of Truth, the Truth about our identity and destiny, about the world and history, about God as a "given." It is given in a moment of unveiling when Truth shows itself. The deepest Truth is Truth of revelation.

This is not to disparage or denigrate patient experimentation, exploration and research; it is only to affirm that the secret of deepest mysteries of life, of the world and God are not at the conclusion of a mathematical computation nor a logical syllogism; rather, in a flash of insight, the Truth shows itself.

Thus, I ask about Truth dawning.

I ask also about response to Truth; how do we respond to the Truth that shows itself, manifests itself? Do we yield to it, allowing ourselves to be changed by it? Do we resist it? Deny it? Close ourselves against it?

The question arises in this season of Epiphany. God is manifest in our world; we have seen the light of revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The Prophet understood that God would bring the light of truth to the world. He understood that Israel had been the "place" of revelation and also that it was Israel's role to be the Servant of the Lord to bring light to the nations. The universalism present already in the call of Abraham would be effected – through the Servant of the Lord – Israel and, specifically, one who would arise from Israel.

Reflect for a moment.

Advent - Coming. The Lord's coming.

The Prophet sensed the Kingdom was dawning in the release of the Exiles.

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people. You who bring Zion good news, up with you to the mountaintop; ...cry to the cities of Judah, your God is here.

Last week we heard that beautiful word from Isaiah 42:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. ...He will not break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smouldering wick...I have formed you, and appointed you to be a light to all peoples, a beacon for the nations...

The Old Testament Lesson repeats the Servant's calling —

I will make you a light to the nations, to be my salvation to earth's farthest bound.

Israel lived in expectation of One who would come, who would bring salvation to the nation and to the nations.

Christmas - the birth of the Promised One - a Saviour; good news of a great joy to all people. The Light shines in the darkness for the Word becomes flesh, full of grace and Truth.

Epiphany - unveiling, manifestation, revelation; Light has come into the world. Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world."

Now, the question is how will we respond? The Gospels tell us that the presence of the Light elicits a double reaction: some receive the light with joy and find salvation; some resist the light and miss God's gracious gift.

Already in the Nativity stories we are forewarned that the response to this child will be mixed.

Matthew recorded that as we saw last week; the wise men stopped at Herod's Court to inquire where the child was born whose star they had seen. Herod's

response was not joy that the Earth had received the gift of a child who would be a King. Rather, he searched for the child to destroy it and, failing to find it, slaughtered all male children two years old and under.

Hostility already at the beginning!

The Wise Men worshiped; Herod murdered.

Luke gives us a shadow of foreboding at the beginning, as well. Old Simeon, a devout and trusting servant of God, was waiting for that dramatic movement through which God would redeem His people and bring light to the world. As the child was brought to the Temple, the Spirit nudged old Simeon. He took the child in his arms and uttered those familiar and beautiful words.

Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace ... for mine eyes have seen thy salvation ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.

A beautiful response, indeed. Simeon had prayed and waited and one day, holding the child, the truth dawned on him. He embraced the child and embraced the Truth.

But Simeon had more to say; he went on to say,

Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against ... that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.

A sign spoken against, a sign of contradiction. This child would elicit a double response: some would fall, some rise.

Epiphany is a season that reminds us that God is manifest in the world -that He came to us in Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrated so recently and whose passion and death we will be all too soon remembering. Epiphany is a bridge period in which we recognize the presence in our world of Truth and light and move from the joyful celebration of its dawning to the awful remembrance when we did our best to douse the light by killing the one in whom it dawned. It is that sobering reality that we confront in this message. We are always placed before the choice to walk in the light or to choose the darkness.

I have a book on my desk entitled, *Jesus, Inspiring and Disturbing Presence*. We have been celebrating the inspiring side of the equation, the joy, the hope, the love that came to us in Jesus. But, there is the other side – the call to decision, the call to repentance, the call to die to self and follow Jesus in the life of service and sacrifice.

Jesus is not an interesting figure of the past; he is very much the present, living Lord. In the *Atlantic Monthly* of December, 1986, there is a lengthy essay entitled, "Who Do Men Say That I Am?" It is a superb summary of the understanding of Jesus through the centuries. David Tracy, theologian at the University of Chicago, is quoted as saying that more has been written about Jesus in the last twenty years than in the previous two thousand.

"Jesus is very much a figure of discussion and controversy in our present world and the followers of Jesus to the extent that they are true to what came to expression in him will be at the center of controversy in the world."

He is absolutely right. Our world is not through with Jesus. It is very easy for us to slip into a mode of thinking that Jesus is a figure of the past. Christmas with all of the beautiful pageantry, and all the sentimentality that arises in our hearts, sometimes veils from our eyes the reality of the living Jesus, the living Lord in our world today. And, as a matter of fact, Jesus Christ continues to be the linchpin of history, and the very center of our world.

John said of him, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it." But the darkness has never ceased trying to overcome it. Matthew tipped us off in the very beginning, just like Luke. He told about the worship of the Magi. And in that he saw the coming of the Gentiles to the light of Christ, but in the course of that narrative, he recorded the stop in Herod's Court, and Herod's fear and paranoia and Herod's slaughter of the innocent children. In an effort to wipe out this child whose birth was announced with a star.

So, at the very beginning of the gospel, there were already foreshadowings of that which is to come. We are warned by both Matthew and Luke in the very nativity stories that this child will be a source of contradiction in the world: that there is something in Jesus that will cut against the grain of this world, that there is something in Jesus that will encounter us and confront us and judge us, that there is something in Jesus that will call us to die in order to be made new and to follow him as his disciple. It is not all sweetness and light! There is violence, there is darkness, there is the hostility against the light already in the gospel narrative of his birth. And so I ask you this morning, on this second Sunday of Epiphany, the light that shines in our world: How do you respond when truth dawns upon you? What difference does it make in your life that Jesus has come? What difference does it make in your living, that you claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? How are you different? What decisions do you make and what transformation has occurred because you follow Jesus? That's the question of Epiphany. For it is one thing to celebrate the presence of the Light and it is another thing to ask ourselves how seriously we walk in the Light.

Our world is not done with Jesus Christ. And, as those who claim him as Savior and have pledged to follow him as Lord, let me ask you. How do you respond when light dawns on you? Well, let me ask it this way. When is the last time you

had a new thought? When is the last time you found yourself confronted with an insight that challenged a long-held conviction? How long has it been since in the presence of Jesus Christ or contemplating who he is and what his word says, that you have changed an opinion, that you have altered an attitude, that you have found your lifestyle modified by the fact that the light has dawned upon us? Our world is not yet done with Jesus Christ. And it is one thing to believe in Him; it is another to follow Him! It is one thing to have a kind of intellectual assent to the fact that he lived and died and maybe rose again. It is another thing to have him be the pattern of our living and to pattern our living in the light of who he was and what he calls us to be.

Our world is not yet done with Jesus Christ. He is still the center and he is still full of controversy and he is still full of contradiction. If we have not found our lives contradicted by Jesus, we can be sure that we have not heard the gospel. We have a way in this twentieth century, in this affluent America, in this Christian church, we have a way of domesticating the gospel, of taking the sharpness off the corners, and of trivializing the message. We forget the radicality of the things that Jesus stood for. It is not easy to be a twentieth-century American and to follow Jesus. Much easier, I believe, to have been a peasant in Palestine, much easier to follow Jesus if one is disinvested, disenfranchised, if one is oppressed, if one has no vested interest in anything, if one has no place to go but up. Then it is not hard to forsake everything and follow Jesus. But how does one follow Jesus when one is a member of western civilization, of American culture, of the most affluent society the world has ever known? The most educated, the most sophisticated, the most resourceful, technically and scientifically most advanced? What does one do in a society like this when one is called to follow Jesus?

What does one do when one is confronted by Jesus and contradicted by Jesus, when that contradiction and confrontation run against the grain of everything that is American value, that is western value, that is Christian value. The moment there is a nation, it becomes institutional. The moment there's a church, it becomes institutional. The moment there is any kind of structuring in society, we get institutionalization and as soon as there is institutionalization we all have our vested interests and in maintaining the status quo. It's true of our government. And we ought not be too hard on our leaders. They are people just like us. And what are they trying to do? They're trying to do the same thing that Herod was trying to do. In the Pentagon and the Reagan Administration: messing around with Iran and Iraq, meddling around in South America, fiddling around in South Africa – what are we trying to do? We are trying to maintain the balance of power; we are trying to preserve the edge of power; we are trying to preserve the place of preeminence. And after all, isn't that why we elect our officials: in order to keep the American way of life, in order to keep the economy booming, in order to keep the military strong enough so that we'll be invulnerable to attack? What do we expect of our leaders if not that? Do we not charge our President with the necessity of enforcing the Constitution?

And it's not only in the state; it's in the church as well. As soon as the church becomes an institution, then we are more concerned about the perpetuation and the preservation of the institution than we are the questions of truth or obedience. And that comes right down to the local level and comes right down to the local congregation and it comes right down to Christ Community Church. And do we make our response in terms of what is a responsible obedience to following Jesus or do we make our decision in terms of what is good and enhancing for the institution?

And it comes, of course, right down into our personal lives. Not so much what we believe, but the extent to which our belief alters the way we live. There is a structure of belief which we all have and profess and then there is an operational level of belief – that upon which we function. And we function most of the time in terms of self-interest, in terms of vested interest. In terms of our own wellbeing and our own welfare. And that's human and that's natural, but every once in a while we need to step back and say, Jesus: sign of contradiction. Jesus: sign spoken against. Jesus, what does it mean to follow you today in America in 1987, in Grand Haven in Spring Lake, in comfortable western Michigan, where nature smiles for seven miles. What does it mean, Jesus, what difference does it make because I belong to you?

In all of my relationships, all of my business, all of my pleasure, light has dawned upon the world. How do we respond to the fact that Light has dawned? The world is not done with Jesus. More has been written in the last 20 years than in the previous 2000. Jesus is still very much living Lord and he proclaimed a kingdom and has a salvation to bring to earth's farthest bounds. The church is not to be some little backwater ghetto. It is not simply to be a cozy little community of people who are weak and who still need God in order to get by. The church is that revolutionary group gathered around that revolutionary person whose radicality in the midst of human society got him crucified. Tomorrow Martin Luther King's birthday was celebrated. I repent that while he was leading the civil rights movement, I did not pray for him. I think I was rather irritated by him. When he spoke out against the Vietnam War, when it was unpatriotic to do so, I'm sorry I was not prophetic enough to understand and to lend my voice. And when I read his sermons and speeches I know that they were inspired by Jesus, who was always against the oppressor and always to set the oppressed free. Last year the Catholic bishops came out with a paper on nuclear disarmament. You may agree or you may disagree with their conclusions, if you follow Jesus, you can not question that church leaders – all Christians – have an imperative to address themselves to an issue which has brought the whole human race, for which God intends salvation, into jeopardy. This year the bishops come out with a paper on economic policy. You may think they're wild; you may think they're in left field; you may question their conclusions, but you may not question that the church of Jesus Christ and those who lead in Jesus' name have a right and a responsibility to address the economy in order to ensure that there is some measure of justice in this world. Jesus was revolutionary – not in terms of the zealots who wanted

simply to throw off the Roman yoke, and who would have come in with their own regime which would have been just as oppressive – but Jesus was revolutionary in that he stood against everything that seems to drive the human spirit. Jesus was the one who said if you want to live then you must die. Jesus was the one who said love your enemies, pray for your enemies, pray for those who spitefully use you. Funny man, funny man! Strange person! He is like a knot that will not be dissolved in the middle of the human family. And those who follow him may not be simply a comfortable community who use God for their own tranquility. Those who follow Jesus are called to be a community of people who are as radical and as revolutionary, who can never adopt any political platform, who can never be at ease with any creed or confession, who can never give absolute loyalty to any state or to any church because they are a people who will give ultimate allegiance to God alone, following Jesus. No matter what the price.

Can you remember the last time in the presence of Jesus you ever changed your mind? Has a prejudice ever melted away? Has an opinion ever been altered? Has a conviction ever been changed because you held it up in the light of his face and felt judged and repented and experienced the liberation, the freedom that is the consequence of the Truth? I'm afraid for most of us our religion is a cultural matter. For most of us God is one to be used and religion is for comfort. I have a book on my desk that says, *Jesus: Inspiring and Disturbing Presence*. Oh, inspiring to be sure, inspiring to be sure – and disturbing. Because to follow him, to be faced with a decision and to ask what would Jesus do, is a very radical thing to do. I don't do it very well. I repent and pray that I may follow him.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus you said you came into the world not to condemn the world but that the world through you might be saved. Then the gospel record goes on to say that this is the condemnation: that light has come into the world and men love darkness rather than light. God forgive us. And enable us by your grace to rise up and follow the light where ever it may lead, following in the master's steps, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we pray. Amen.