

Dare To Follow the Light

Text: Isaiah 60:6-7; Ephesians 3:9; Matthew 2:2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ, the Light of which the prophet in Israel spoke, that Light of God which was Israel's treasure in order that they might be a beacon to the nations, Matthew now sees coming to manifestation in Jesus. There, in the face of Jesus, we see into the heart of God. And Paul with his experience, being knocked off his horse by that light from heaven, realizes that the mystery of God hid for the ages, now manifest, is that there is grace for the whole world. That really is the Epiphany story. We read it in Matthew's Gospel, and not only there but in the prophet, in Paul's understanding, the Light has come. "The Light has come; the Light has dawned upon you."

The light has dawned upon us but we recognize immediately in that story of Jesus as Matthew tells it that, when the light comes, the darkness is threatened, and all hell breaks loose. This is the story of Herod, threatened by the announcement of this newborn king, who passes a decree that the innocents should be slaughtered in order to wipe out any pretender to the throne. Matthew is telling us immediately in this joyous announcement of the birth of Jesus that the world will not take kindly to the light, and that has been the story down through 2000 years, has it not? It has been the story forever. The Christian Gospel is the announcement of the Light of God. It is seen in continuity with that light that dawned on Israel, and now for 2000 years the Gospel has been proclaimed and the light of God has shined throughout the whole world.

This morning I want to suggest to you that it is not a question of whether or not the Light has dawned. The question always before the Church, and the question before us this morning is whether or not we will dare to follow the Light. I want to suggest to you that Paul was a courageous person who made a radical break with that heavy, sturdy tradition in which he had been nurtured. When confronted by the Light, he recognized the call of God to take the Light to the nations. We take that for granted. We celebrate Epiphany as the dawning of the Light that had shone on Israel, which was now being manifest to the whole world, symbolized by the coming of the Magi. So, it's ho-hum; we take it for granted.

But, you couldn't have taken it for granted if you had lived at the time of the event itself. For Paul to realize, to sense a calling of God, to take the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles involved Paul going contrary to all of that that had been nurtured in him.

Paul had to be a person of daring to say that the Gentiles can be reconciled to God by God's grace without first becoming Jews. Paul was a radical reformer, and there was great tension in that early Church. It was a long time before the question was settled as to whether or not there would be a separate Jesus Christian Movement or whether Paul could prevail within the Jewish community itself to see in Jesus this Light of God. But, Paul had the courage to act on his conviction and that at great cost. As he writes in this third chapter to the Ephesians, the secret, long hid with God, but now made manifest, is precisely that - that the grace of God is for the Gentiles so that Jew and Gentile will form one new humanity. In another place in this letter he speaks about that wall of separation being torn down. Paul had cut his eyeteeth on the idea of Jewish separation, that separation over against all others. But, Paul says no more wall, no more partition, no more separation. Now what God has said in Jesus Christ is that God is moved to embrace all. That took courage and Paul paid for it dearly, as many of his writings will indicate. My Epiphany message 1997 is this: Do we have the courage to follow the light?

Our problem is not a lack of knowledge. I think the prophets and apostles and preachers for ages have recognized that the light has dawned. But there has been a failure of nerve to live out the implications of the light. It seems to me that here we are 2000 years down from the event of the gift of that one in whose face we've seen the light of the glory of God. What are the issues before us in the light of that light; what is God calling us to do and to be in our day in order to follow the light? It's one thing to dance in the light. It's another thing to behave and to act in light of the light. I want to suggest to you, because of the nature of our situation, that the stand we have taken as a congregation is the only responsible and reasonable way in which the Church of Jesus Christ can respond to the light and follow the light.

Bill Moyers has been in the news a lot lately. His Genesis series is very, very popular, and he's done a lot of other things. I knew he was a Southern Baptist minister, but I was surprised that Southern Baptists invited him to address the Texas Conference, because the Southern Baptist Convention has been taken over in the last decade or decade and a half by very conservative, fundamentalist forces. But, Moyers addressed the Texas Southern Baptist Convention and he said to them in a little clip I found in the newspaper, that there is a "whole new religious reality out there" and you have to change from militant anger over the fact that the universe is not closed and life is not static. Well, it sounds like he really gave them both barrels, and he probably won't be invited back, but what he said is true and we all know it. There's a whole new religious reality out there and most of the Church wants to put its head in the sand as though it doesn't exist.

Isaiah thought the end was imminent and the light was dawning. Five hundred years later, and Matthew thought the light had dawned and the end was imminent. And now it's 2000 years later still. Do you suppose that God in heaven is saying, "What in heaven's name are you people doing? Why don't you keep following the light? Why don't you keep working out the implications of the light?" Is it not evident to anybody with any sensitivity to our present global situation that world evangelization that has been the impulse of the Church all these years is an impulse that has hit a dead end? We do not see the evangelization of the world according to the Gospel of Christ. We see the resurgence of the great world religions.

We live in a global community that must increasingly become a community of communities. We are able to communicate together in the world that has become a neighborhood; we are learning the insights and the sensitivities and the light that has dawned on others. Are we not being challenged to go into the arena and share our insight and our light that has been God's gift through Jesus Christ with others who share their gifts, as well? On the edge of the third millennium, should we not be facing the reality of global consciousness and working out the implications for our pluralistic world? Paul was confronted with a new situation - a new door opened and Paul had the courage to go through that door. It is time for someone to recognize that the mystery is even deeper, grander, and brighter than even Paul understood, that God has a grander scheme, and that we have a treasure in Jesus Christ to bring to the table in a world that sits down and discusses the respective riches of the traditions, bringing together the Light that God has given.

It's one thing to say the Light has dawned. It's another thing to have the courage to live out its implications, and it does take courage. Such courage is exercised only at considerable cost. That's the reason that the world is not transformed. It's not a lack of light; it's a lack of courage.

I got a letter the other day from an old friend. Really a dear letter. Worried about me, he says after a bit, "What if you've been wrong? What if the faith you once held but have moved more and more away from is true?" He's a friend saying to me, "What if you're wrong?" Well, he says I hear you say I'm willing to take that chance. Finally, he says, "So, I invite you to take a fresh look, to ask again for God's light." I say, "Fine. Don't think I don't."

I know that there is insight out there; there's a sense down deep in the core of many people that the kind of things I have said publicly are what any reasonable analysis would conclude, but it's costly and it takes courage to say it. That word has appeared in letter after letter from around the world. "Thank you for your courage." Do we have the courage to follow the light? How long will we bask in the Light that has dawned without doing something about it because, without the courage to act on the Light, the world will not be transformed.

The issue that got us into controversy a year ago was the issue of sexual orientation and my recognition because of the growing light, knowledge, and experience, that sexual orientation is not a moral issue. I have in my hands a book which is brilliant. It's called *Virtually Normal*, written by Andrew Sullivan, who is the editor of "The New Republic." It is splendidly written and beautifully argued, and Andrew Sullivan, dealing with the whole matter of sexual orientation, himself being a gay man, speaks about various groups lined up on this issue - the prohibitionists, the liberationists, the conservatives, the liberals - he comes to the liberals, and one would think that he, being a gay person, would affirm the liberal attempt to create space for the gay/lesbian community. He is appreciative of the legislation that seeks to rule out discrimination and that kind of thing, but he says finally the liberals who believe in freedom are denying their own most fundamental principles because this issue is not something that can finally be legislated and it cannot be fixed by law. Then speaking for himself, but I think speaking out of a profound experience and a brilliant insight, he says that the key to the healing and liberation of any person of homosexual orientation lies within themselves. He points to the civil rights movement of the 60s and he says perhaps the most enduring legacy of the civil rights movement was not its panoply of complicated and cumbersome laws, but the memory of the simple courage of those who stood up in the face of considerable danger for their dignity and equality. "What one remembers, what will never be erased from human consciousness was the gleam of integrity in the eyes of those who took it upon themselves to change their world, expecting no protection and no applause for doing so. It is courage that gets noticed and courage that changes the world."

The pain of the homosexual experience requires that kind of catharsis to be healed. Nothing else can replace it. That is the case with Jerry Crane, the teacher in Byron Center who declared who he was in his faithful covenant relationship with another, who to be sure was hounded out of his teaching job and who had to endure two and three and four times as much press as I have, but who nevertheless as a dignified human being, as a man of class and culture, had the gleam in his eye because he was who he was and he stood there exposed in his full humanity. He died this week, but his courage will change the world.

I'll tell you there are all kinds of us crouching in the bushes, and I'm not talking now about sexual orientation, I'm talking about the things, the core values by which we live - there are all kinds of us who believe things deep down that we've never had enough courage to stand up and speak for. And there's only one thing that really liberates the human soul; there's only one thing that brings us into the fullness of the human experience - it is when we are true to the light as it has dawned upon us. When the light has dawned upon us and we are true to it, we may find ourselves in Ramah, weeping for our children, not able to be comforted. But we will have been true, and when we will have been true, that will be enough.