

In Nomine Iesu

Epiphany Sunday 2023

The Light and Glory of the Christian Church – Matthew 4:13-17

“And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.’”

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.””

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Light who enlightens the Gentiles, and the Glory of His people Israel. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the revealing to the world of its Savior, who was born in Bethlehem. We leave manger and stable and enter deeply into the mystery of the Word made flesh, who came to live among us and save us. We move beyond the incarnation and birth of Christ, the Son of God and Son of Mary, the focus of Christmas, to the prophet Isaiah’s vision of God’s gracious will for all humanity, which Isaiah says will begin in the land once given to Zebulun and Naphtali, calling it as “the way of the sea,” “the land beyond the Jordan,” and, most notably, “Galilee of the nations.” Matthew not only repeats Isaiah, but defines exactly what Isaiah meant by saying of Jesus, “he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, **so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.**” (v. 13)

I

Later Matthew tells us what Jesus said about the meaning of Isaiah’s words, specifically naming Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matthew 11:20-24) as the places where the Messiah would make Himself known to His people. What is more, He would appear there not only for the sake of His own people, but for all people. So, where were these towns? Well, if you were journeying from Bethsaida at the top of the Sea of Galilee, along “the way of the sea,” Capernaum would be the very first town you would come to at the border of Galilee. That was why in Jesus’ day there was a Roman customs station there, and a detachment of Roman soldiers, whose commander Jesus would encounter very early in his ministry. He, a centurion, came to Jesus seeking help for his servant. (Matthew 8:5-13) Of this Roman’s faith Jesus said, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from the east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Thereafter Jesus said to the centurion, “Go, let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.

When Mary and Joseph brought their infant Son to Jerusalem’s temple for the first time, Simeon recognized the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies. He said as He held the Child in his arms, “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of the peoples,” -- note the similarity of Simeon’s language to Isaiah’s -- “a **light** to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the **glory** of Your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32)

But the prophet Isaiah looks beyond this. He sees that the glory of this Light would rise over you and me too. Isaiah was speaking about the good news of forgiveness flowing out of Christ's resurrection and ascension. The good news of forgiveness is the light of Christ, it is the glory that rises over us, as Isaiah said. In the preaching of the gospel the Christ, the Savior, the Seed of the woman, is openly revealed to dying humanity as the One who crushes the serpent's head and so puts death to death. His salvation is freely given out to the people of the world, Jew and Gentile, for all to hear and believe.

To be sure, the Light of which Isaiah spoke came into the world at Bethlehem, where it lay hidden in the lowly birth of the Christ-child, seen only by shepherds on whom the light of heaven shone as the angels sang. The wondrous star that led the wise men to Bethlehem proclaimed something extraordinary about the child it shone on. But except for them, no one recognized the Christ-child, the Savior, in the light of that miraculous star. Similarly, Jesus would live in Capernaum at the Galilean border, a carpenter's Son, who would begin His ministry among Jews and Gentiles, unrecognized by many, but known to those who saw by faith the light of heaven shining through Him. He would be the Lord of glory who hung on the accursed tree, making full satisfaction for the sins of the world. His light was hidden in the darkness that prevailed from the sixth hour to the ninth, hidden in the shame of the cross. But with His resurrection and then ascension to the right hand of God, the divine light of his incarnation would indeed "arise over [us]," just as Isaiah said. And the glory of the crucified and risen Christ would be "seen upon [us]," again, just as the prophet foretold.

II

How does this happen today? How do Gentiles from distant lands continue to stream in their thousands to this Light as Isaiah predicted? The Gospel in word and sacrament was entrusted to the Christian Church. In it, Jesus Christ, the Light that has come into this dying world covered by the darkness of sin continues to shine on us, just it did on those who climbed the mountain at the beginning of Jesus' ministry to hear Him say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," just as it did on the Roman centurion, who came to Jesus seeking mercy for his servant, when Jesus came down the mountain to Capernaum again. In this Gospel, this good news of forgiveness, the light of the crucified and risen Savior shines. And so Isaiah says to one and all, "Arise, shine, for your light has come." That is, believe what you hear about sin and salvation. Do not trust in your goodness. It cannot stand in the day of judgment. Trust Him who lived and died for you, whose saving light will shine in your heart, fill it, and be reflected back on those whose lives touch yours. Then you too will reflect Christ's glory and, "Gentiles shall come to your light and Kings to the brightness of your rising." In other words, still more people will see the light and believe through your words and your life.

By the grace of God, we have this light. The pure Word continues to be preached among us in spite of the many attacks on it, in spite of our many shortcomings. The Sacraments remain with us, untainted by the many errors, ancient and modern, which have tried to dim the light of the Gospel and so cast doubt on the sure and certain forgiveness that is in Christ Jesus. This too was foreseen in Isaiah's prophecies. But it is not enough to see that our rising and shining was foreseen by Isaiah. No, we must evaluate the brightness of our rising. For to have the light of Christ's Gospel and to let it shine forth in all its brightness and glory are two different things.

The question we must ask ourselves is this: Does the Gospel of Christ shine forth with all its brightness? Can Christ's glory be seen upon us with its full brilliance? Will those who do not yet believe hear in our preaching, see in our treasuring of the sacraments, a

love for our Lord and for His church, past, present and future? Will they see in our lives a people driven and sustained by mercy and forgiveness? Or will they see other things more important to us than the Gospel? Will they see just an activity called “church,” and not the wonder and glory that is the salvation we have in Jesus Christ.

But thanks be to God Isaiah does not say that nations will come to our lights and Kings to the brightness which shines from us. Rather, he says that nations will come to our **Light, singular**, that is, to Christ, and kings to the **Brightness** (Christ) which shines not from us, but on us. We do not want people to follow us. We have nothing for them. We want them to follow Him whom we follow, our Savior Jesus Christ. So, dear friends, the Church has no more important work to do than to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. That is our light. The Gospel in word and Sacrament is itself the mission effort and method of the Church. In no other way will the darkness that covers the earth be pierced. In no other way will the unbelieving world be led to Christ and kept in the true faith.

III

So how can we let that light shine forth more and more brightly? First of all, we must regularly gather in the light of the Gospel ourselves if we are to be enlightened by it, if our hearts are to be filled with it. That is why it says in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together as is the manner of some.” Over the centuries the church, those who believe in the **Light** who came into the world, the **Light** that Isaiah saw in his vision so long ago, have gathered together in Jesus’ name. This is no ordinary gathering, not just a meeting of some club of Christians. It is a special and unique gathering. It is like the gathering of the shepherds around the manger. It is like the gathering of the wise men around Christ in Bethlehem. It is like the centurion who was drawn to Jesus. The Divine Service is the light that shines in the darkness, because in it Christ is present among us in word and sacrament with all his forgiveness and mercy. Here faith is nurtured and hearts filled with the light that shone upon Jew and Gentile alike in Galilee of the nations.

But just as in Galilee so long ago, these things must be taught and explained to people clearly, patiently, and often, and then taught again -- to individuals and to groups, both small and large. It must be explained to those who do not yet know Christ, to those who are new to the faith, and even to mature Christians who are constantly assaulted by the devil and the weakness of their own hearts and minds. This is the mission of Christ’s church, to invite, to encourage, to explain, to proclaim, and to rejoice that the **Light of salvation**, Jesus Christ, has come into the world. This is the Light and Glory of the Holy Christian Church. It is her prime directive, her chief task, her great joy.

+++

As the light of Christ shown in Galilee’s darkness, so the light of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament will draw us ever closer to Christ, ever more deeply into the mystery of God’s love for sinful mankind. Isaiah says: “Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” His words are spoken to us. As this new year of grace begins, let us be bold to come to the light of Jesus Christ, to the brightness that has risen over us, and to invite and encourage, teach, and explain to others, patiently and lovingly. God grant us such desire for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria