

4 January 2009
The Epiphany of our Lord

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Vienna, VA

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“The Light in the Darkness”

Text: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12 (Ephesians 3:1-12)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some 700 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed: ***Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.***

When Isaiah proclaimed those words, the people had no idea just how thick and deep the darkness was going to be. Israel and Judah were still in the twilight, but the sun was fast going down on their kingdoms. In just a few generations, the Assyrians and the Babylonians would reduce them to rubble. God would discipline His people for their disobedience and unfaithfulness, and give the land the Sabbath rest His people would not. And so for 70 years His people would live as prisoners of war. 70 years in a strange land, with a strange culture, with a strange language, with strange customs, and with strange gods. It would not be easy.

Among those taken from Judah to Babylon, we know the names of four young men in particular - young men who (we are told) were ***“skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, [and] understanding learning.”*** (Daniel 1:4) They were among the best and the brightest, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, wanted to teach and raise in his kingdom, for his use and benefit. What Nebuchadnezzar *didn't* know was that according to *God's* plan, the learning, use, and benefit was actually going to work in the other direction! For these four youths named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah - the latter three better known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego - *would teach the Babylonians* about the God of Israel, the one true God. And we see that in their exile, God was not abandoning His people, but was, in fact, with them. And that God was going to use this time of deep and thick darkness to proclaim His name and His glory.

And so when God saved Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the flames of the fiery furnace, the Babylonians learned that ***“there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.”*** (Daniel 3:29) And when God saved Daniel from the mouths of lions in the Lion's Den, they learned that ***“he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He***

delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth." (Daniel 6:26-27) But while with these two rescues, the Babylonians had seen some great and mighty wonders, well, *they ain't seen nothin' yet*. For God was saving His greatest rescue, His greatest deliverance, His greatest wonder, to be seen by some *other* wise men many generations later.

Now, we're not exactly sure who **the wise men from the East**, mentioned by Matthew, were. They mysteriously arrive in Jerusalem and just as mysteriously exit the scene - but it seems probable that they were the descendants of the wise men among whom those four youths lived and learned; who had learned of a God in Israel; who had been told of the deliverance of these youths from fire and beast. And so when the star appears, they arise and head off to see **the Lord who has arisen** among His people. They arise to go see not just "a" king of the Jews, but the *true* King of the Jews.

And when they arrive - after a short detour to Jerusalem - what did they see? A baby? Yes . . . and no. Physical eyes see a child, but spiritual eyes see the God who saved the three young men from the fiery furnace, and the God who saved Daniel from the mouths of the lions. They see the God who had now come to accomplish a *greater* deliverance than that - the God who came to save all people from the fires of hell, and from the mouth of the devilish lion. They saw the God who so loved the world that He took on human flesh and blood to save us from our sins. And so when they entered the house, what else could they do but **fall down and worship him**, and give Him their **treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh**. Gifts befitting this child who is a prophet, priest, and king. This child named Jesus, which means: *the Lord saves*.

And the words of Isaiah the prophet had come true: the Light of the world had come to banish the darkness of our sin, and give us hope.

That is also what happened to St. Paul, who we heard from in the Epistle today. Paul's darkness was pretty deep and thick as well. He was in the dark as he was persecuting the Church and trying to stamp it out, *until* the light of Christ shone upon him. He then lived in the darkness of blindness *until* he was baptized into Christ. And now, as he writes the Epistle to the Ephesians, he is in prison for proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. But even in the darkness, God had plans for Paul, and was using Paul to proclaim His name and glory. And so while Paul knew the darkness of sin and unbelief - *knew it from his own life and heart* - he also came to know that on the day the darkness was deepest, when Jesus hung on the cross and the sun ashamed to shine on its crucified Creator; as Jesus hung suspended between God and man, **that was the day the Light shined the brightest**, as Jesus atoned for our sins and reconciled us to the Father. Or as John told us on Christmas Day, **"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the**

darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:4-5)

And this is the Light that shined not only upon the wise men and St. Paul, but now also upon you and made you wise men. Not wise according to the standards and wisdom of the world, but with the wisdom of God, the wisdom of faith, the wisdom of the Word. For at this time and place, you are the ones walking in the darkness of sin and death, and for some of you - like for Israel and Paul - the darkness is very deep indeed. The darkness of sin that is crouching at your door and wants to have you. The darkness of sin that is attacking you. The darkness of fear and loneliness. The darkness of separation and shame. The darkness of doubt and despair. The darkness of what feels like an exile that will never end. The darkness that even masquerades as the light of self-sufficiency and pride and success, but which is simply luring you in deeper. The darkness which says: you don't need God and His Word to be wise, His life to live, or His pardon for your sin. And perhaps our eyes have adjusted to the darkness, and we think it not so bad.

But today, the Epiphany of our Lord, we hear: the Light comes to shine on us. The Morning Star has risen in your heart ***to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*** (2 Cor 4:6) That with the wise men and St. Paul, you know that tiny face which laid in the manger, that gory and bloody face that hung from the cross, and now that face which shines upon you in this place, as the One who was born and died for you, washes away your sins, strengthens your faith, feeds you with His own body and blood, lifts up His countenance upon you, and gives you peace. *Peace even in the midst of darkness.* For He who was with His people in the darkness of their exile, who came to live and die in the darkness for our sin, is with you in whatever darkness you face. Working *in* you to sustain you, and working *through* you to reach others - to be a light to the nations. That as the glory of the Lord has arisen upon you, so too may it arise upon them - whether wise men or beggars. The Epiphany light of our Lord, ***the unsearchable riches of Christ,*** are here for all.

For as long as we are in this world, there is going to be darkness. Satan will do his best to hide the Light of Christ and overshadow us with darkness and fear. And at times, perhaps it seems very deep and thick. But do not fear him, for he could not and cannot extinguish the Light of the world. He tried! He tried through Herod, he tried through temptation, he tried through crucifixion, he tried through persecution, and he is trying still to extinguish Him in you and snuff out your faith. But he lost, and is losing still. For the death and resurrection of Jesus defeated him, and is still winning among us. Winning every time you confess your sins and receive His forgiveness. Winning every time a man, woman, or child is brought to this font to be baptized. Winning every time you open your mouth and eat the body and drink the blood of the crucified and risen one. Winning every time you hear the Word of God proclaimed and take it to heart. Winning every time you repay evil with good.

Winning every time you help your neighbor, love the unloveable, and pray for not only your family, friends, and neighbors, but for your enemies and those who persecute you.

Praying perhaps like Daniel, who refused to pray (as ordered) to the king, but knelt at his window and prayed to the one, true God. Perhaps he was praying for God to shine His light on the king - *which God did*, even though it took throwing Daniel to the lions to do it!

Today, our Daniel fights for us. Our Daniel named Jesus, the Son of God who came down from heaven and to be thrown to the satanic lion and not to be rescued. To feel the jaws of sin and death come down on Him, so they would not come down on us. That when we are thrown to the lions of sin and death, He stand between us and let them harm us none. For this child whose birth we remember this season is the resurrected Lord over sin, death, and the devil - and in Him we are safe; in Him we will be raised out of the den of death; in Him we have a life to live forever.

Today, we remember the wise men, who followed the Light of lights to the King of kings, and once they got there, made the longest journey of all - the journey to their knees. Let us make the same journey today, to His manger of bread and wine, and in heart and mind fall on our knees in repentance and faith, and receive Him who comes to us. The world says you are foolish; Jesus says you are forgiven.

Arise, shine, for your light has come!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.