

23 January 2005
Epiphany 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“True Enlightenment”
Text: Matthew 4:12-23

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

“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.”

In the 17th century, a period of time began which historians call “the enlightenment.” It was a time when human reason and intellect began to make great strides in science and technology. The so-called superstitious and silly ways of the supernatural and religion were being left behind, and now things would be better. More enlightened. And there is no denying that the advances made since that time have had a great impact on our lives today, and have made them better in many ways.

But this verse from Matthew that I just read again, quoting Isaiah, *is still true*. No matter what strides have been made in medicine and technology and learning and discovery; no matter how “enlightened” we think we are, there is still darkness in our world. Deep darkness. The darkness of sin. And no matter how hard we try, we can’t overcome it. And though we may not see it from time to time, it always rears its ugly head and reminds us that its still here. Always here. When terrorists strike and kill many people, *we see the darkness*. When nature convulses and produces tsunamis and mudslides and other natural disasters, *we see the darkness*. When a husband and wife split up, *we see the darkness*. When on this Life Sunday we consider the horrors of abortion, assisted suicide, and mercy killings, *we see the darkness*. And when we look inside ourselves, at our unclean and hateful thoughts, at our selfish and impure motives, at our me-first attitudes and deeds, *we see the darkness*. The darkness of God’s good and wonderful creation plunged into sin.

The Enlightenment thought it could make this darkness go away. If only we try hard enough, and work hard enough, and become advanced enough, human science and reason can find a way out. And still today, many think that if we can just teach more, and legislate more, and become more “advanced” in our thinking and attitudes that we can overcome the darkness and evils in our world. . . . But consider: doesn’t it seem that the

more “advanced” we become, the deeper the darkness gets? From politics to economics to morals and ethics to the apostasy that we see happening in many church bodies today – the darkness isn’t going away. The people dwelling in darkness are not only those living in *“the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles”* – those people are also here. The darkness is alive and well in the world today, in the land of the United States, in Virginia by the sea, in the region of Washington . . .

Now I must tell you that there are people – perhaps *many* people – who will disagree with what I’ve just said. They either cannot see this darkness, or think that it is, in fact, being overcome by us. We should not be surprised at this, though. The ability to see the darkness of sin is not something that we, by nature, can see. For we are by nature in the dark. We confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. And the pot cannot call the kettle black. Born in the darkness, the darkness seems normal to us; right to us. Born in the darkness, the darkness seems natural to us; the way things ought to be. Born in the darkness, the darkness is all we know . . . *until the light goes on.* Until *“The people dwelling in darkness [see the] great light.”* And when the light comes on, the light of God, the light of His Word and grace, we see things as they really are. The brokenness. The evil. The blackness in the world and the blackness in us. And that we can see this where others can’t is no cause for self-righteousness among us; no cause for spiritual pride. For this sight is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit which (we confess in the Creed) calls, gathers, **enlightens**, and sanctifies us (3rd Article explanation). His work in our hearts is the only reason why we can see ourselves and our world as we really are. That we can see them as God sees them.

This is the light prophesied by Isaiah, and during this Epiphany season we celebrate this light of a Saviour now come. The light of the Gospel now proclaimed. The light of the cross now borne for us. And in the light of the cross, we see things differently. We may think we know what **love** is in this sinful world of ours, but the Son of God on the cross shows us what true love is. We may think we know what **faithfulness** is, but the Son of God on the cross shows us a faithfulness beyond any in this world. We may think we know **true righteousness**, but no righteousness of ours can compare to His. We may think we know **obedience**, until we see His obedience. We may think we **sacrifice** and give up much, but the Son of God sacrificed all. For us. For His *enemies*. For those who rebelled against Him and, as we heard from the prophet Amos, deserved punishment. . . . And Jesus, bringing this light into a world of darkness, says **“see!”** And we do see. On the cross we see our sin, and on the cross we see our Saviour, who took our punishment for us. And seeing the truth, *truly enlightened*, we then do the only thing we can do: we repent. And this is the very thing He wants us to do. The very thing He is most pleased with. The very thing He calls us to do: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”**

For when we repent, we are doing two things: we are confessing our darkness and sin, and confessing the One who takes that sin away. We are admitting that we cannot make it better, and that God must make it better. And this is the stance of faith. For faith is not upwardly mobile, our climbing our way into the kingdom of Heaven by our deeds and good works and accomplishments. **Faith is falling on our knees in weakness and repentance . . . because precisely there is the kingdom of heaven!** For contrary to what many think, the kingdom of heaven is not like a carrot on a stick that we are always chasing and trying to catch. Which is a good thing because we are the ones living in darkness, remember? And did you ever try to run in the dark? And how can you catch what you cannot see? And yet many are trying. . . . No, in this world of darkness and sin, the kingdom of heaven came down to us. ***“The kingdom of heaven is at hand,”*** because it came down to us, in a person, in Jesus. We did not find Him; He found us. And to us in the darkness, He brings the light of His Word and Spirit. To us in our sin, He brings the forgiveness He won on the cross. To us in weakness and death, He brings His life and strength. We do not climb up to that – He has brought it down to us, and He now gives it all to us, all that we need, in His Word, and in His Baptism, and in His body and blood. For truly here ***“the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*** Here is true enlightenment.

And so it turns out, not at all surprisingly, that man’s enlightenment, striving to move *“past the superstitious and silly ways of the supernatural and religion,”* has, in fact, led us farther into the darkness; into relying on ourselves; into trying to save ourselves and solve our own problems. And perhaps no where is that more evident than in the life issues we are now facing, and continuing to face. Death is being called good, and life evil. Death is being called the answer, and life the problem. Death is being called light, and life the darkness. And this is not just a “baby thing” anymore, although it started that way. What started with abortion has now spread across every age of life, with those thinking they are the most “advanced” urging us deeper into the darkness of sin and death. And new medicines are making all of this easier than ever before.

But the true light that has come into the world, Jesus Christ, is still in this world. Here with His cross, and the light of His Word and forgiveness. And as with the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, He now bids us follow Him. To not follow the ways and wisdom of men (1 Cor); to not follow the so-called enlightenment of the world; but follow Him. **For following Him is not to live a life that leads to death, but to die a death that leads to life.** For after the cross is the resurrection. And so as we die with Him, we will also live with Him, *“just as He is risen from the dead, [and] lives and reigns to all eternity.”* (2nd Article explanation) . . . And so that we might live, He bids us follow. To follow Him in repentance, to follow Him to His cross, that we might live in His forgiveness and light.

For that is true enlightenment. It will not be easy – in fact, it will cost you your life, for like Him, living at His cross, you will find yourself laying down your life for others. Helping them, defending them, speaking for them. The light will have that effect on you. But fear it not, for the One who called you to follow, who called you into His light and to this life, promises life. Both life now, and life eternal. And this He has already given to you. For that is the power of His cross and forgiveness. Not that we will now live without sin, but that our sin is forgiven, and we are free to live a new life. Free to, in turn, forgive others. Free to follow Him.

Peter and Andrew and James and John heard His call and followed Him. They did not know what they were in for; they didn't always understand; but they shined the light of the Gospel and gave the life they had been given. May it be so also for us, especially in these days of glorified death. That although we do not know what we are in for, and will not always understand, that the light of the Gospel will shine from this place, and give the life we have been given. The light of forgiveness and peace. The light of life and salvation. The true light of our Saviour, here with us. That it may also be said of us: ***“The[se] people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for th[ese] dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.”***

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.