

Light Dawns on You

“... the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on then a light has dawned.” – Matthew 4:16

This weekend, our Epiphany journey continues. What was started with the wisemen’s visit to Jesus and His family, continues until our focus shifts to the season of Lent. Throughout this journey, we hear the language and theme of light emphasized. The star that led the wisemen to Jesus and Jesus’ own transfiguration – that time on the mountain where He shines like lightning – bookend this Epiphany season in this theme of light. While light starts and ends this Epiphany season, it’s also prevalent in between.

When we look especially at our readings from Isaiah and Matthew this weekend, the reference to light is unmistakable. In fact, Matthew builds upon Isaiah’s words as he describes Jesus’ ministry to his readers. Matthew’s direct quote from our Isaiah reading helps us understand that Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is the light which Isaiah proclaims. His ministry, His words and works, shine out in a world shrouded in the darkness of sin.

Listen again to some of Matthew’s quote from Isaiah, from verse sixteen of our Gospel reading, **“... 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.”** (Matthew 4:16) Isaiah and Matthew have a specific image in mind as they describe this Epiphany light, Jesus. They connect Jesus’ ministry to the dawn – the breaking in of the light like a sunrise. Focused on this image, let’s continue our Epiphany journey in two ways. First, we’ll consider other ways we talk about experiences with light as a contrast to what Scripture is sharing. Second, we’ll zero in on this dawning image and its ongoing impact.

To help us further appreciate the Bible’s description of Jesus’ ministry as dawning light in a dark and sinful world, I’ll share three different ways we sometimes perceive light amid darkness. These descriptions are designed to highlight the sinful struggle with God’s light, reveal misunderstanding and ultimately point us back to our readings’ description of God’s light in this world. Here are the three descriptions we’ll consider: blinded by the light, deer in the headlights and the moth to a flame.

Being blinded by the light is something that many of us have experienced. Whether it’s as we drive during this winter season and that low hanging sun lasers through our windshield into our eyes or as the lights are abruptly turned on after being off for a movie or show, we know the discomfort and even pain that comes from eyes adjusting to overwhelming brilliance. An experience like this, can lead to the misunderstanding that the light is hurtful or even a threat. So, the response is to hide from the light or even cover it up.

Since Christmas, we’ve heard this kind of reaction to the light of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, we hear about the light of Christ coming into the world, into that which was His own, **“but his own did not receive him.”** (John 1:11a) With King Herod and then the religious leaders during Jesus’ day, John’s words move from generalities to quite specific. Herod and the religious leaders were so blinded by the light, they sought to snuff the light out but were unsuccessful. Even now, we witness similar attacks on the light of Jesus around us and within us as we try to cover up God’s light but fail to do so.

Now let’s consider the second description, the deer in the headlights. If you’re unaware of this experience, it comes from the literal observation of deer in the face of upcoming vehicle headlights. The suddenness of the vehicle’s headlights surprises and stuns a deer to freeze in place. And unfortunately, their paralysis often leads to greater trouble. This type of experience misunderstands light as confusing and leads to inaction.

As we continue to follow Jesus’ ministry over the next several weeks, this type of reaction to Jesus’ light will become more noticeable. Jesus’ twelve disciples, some of whom get selected today in our Gospel reading demonstrate this experience well. During their few years with Jesus, the twelve disciples experience multiple times where Jesus’ light leaves them dazed, confused and uncertain of how to react. No experience is clearer than with Peter, who in just a few weeks will confess Jesus as the Son of God and then

immediately undermine his own confession by trying to prevent Jesus from completing what He was sent to do. Like Peter and the other disciples, you and I also wrestle with this experience. As Jesus' light interacts with our sinful lives and the sinfulness in the world around us, we too become stunned, confused and frozen, unsure how to act, especially when the foolishness of the cross confronts our worldly wisdom.

Let's move to the third description we're considering this weekend, the moth to a flame. While I specifically mention a moth, I'd imagine that you've experienced this reality with all sorts of bugs. There is this attraction that insects have with light. They can't help themselves! They must check out the light! Yet, the challenge comes as their attraction consumes them and they attempt to use the light in ways that it wasn't intended to be used. This misunderstanding of the light can be fatal.

Again, we'll see a similar thing with Jesus' ministry. In fact, we catch a real glimpse of this beginning at the end of our Gospel reading this weekend. As Jesus heals and His fame spreads, crowds begin to follow Him. They are attracted to Jesus because of the temporal relief He delivers, however, they misunderstand His ultimate purpose. Temporal relief isn't His main calling, rather He comes for eternal relief. As Jesus teaches and proclaims words to bring relief to the heart and soul, some of these very followers leave missing the relief He brings from eternal death. What we witness in those followers, is something we see in ourselves too. Our attraction to Jesus is so narrowed that we're in danger of missing His greater purpose of delivering life everlasting.

These three experiences of light, blinded by the light, deer in the headlights and the moth to a flame highlight our sinful struggle with Jesus' light. Sometimes we find His light threatening, other times confusing and still other times His light is attractive only when it fits what we think are our greatest needs. Too easily we misunderstand Jesus' light in our lives, and this is why we must return to Isaiah and Matthew's image of Jesus' light as the dawn. **"... 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."** (*Matthew 4:16*)

The Bible's description of Jesus words and works as the dawning light, seems to imply that truly the experience with the light of Jesus is to be gradual. He doesn't come to be threatening or confusing or deceptive, but to slowly and consistently illuminate. As the sun rises, and its light gently and deliberately reveals more and more, so also Jesus' interaction with His creation is compassionate, patient and determined. Instead of jumping right to the solution of the cross, Jesus teaches, heals and relates with His creation for three years preparing this world for what was to come.

And what was to come was the truth that His light impacts everything. Nothing in this world is out of the reach of the light of His kingdom. His proclamation, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"** (*Matthew 4:17*), was a revelation that His light claimed all of creation, all our lives not just the portion where we think we need His help. There are no shadowy areas in Jesus' kingdom – things that are outside His kingdom's borders – for even the valley of the shadow of death and the darkness of the grave have been exposed to His light. By the light of His life, death, resurrection and ascension, the depths and darkness of sin, death and hell have been exposed and defeated and the light of heaven has been won and given to us.

Now, this weekend, the light of Jesus that dawned on the generations before us dawns on you and me. Throughout this Epiphany journey and throughout our faith journeys Christ light is gradually revealing its impact on every aspect of lives. Nothing in our lives is outside the reach of His light, for He has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. By the light of His word, He guides our lives to reflect the brilliance and warmth of His light as we live forgiven and forgiving. As we grow in our Savior's light, we show to the world His glory, that His light isn't threatening, confusing or deceptive but exactly what our lives need to thrive, on earth and in heaven. Friends in Christ, this weekend we have seen a great light, on us a light has dawned. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan