

Light in the Midst of Darkness

Matthew 2:1 ff.

The past three years have been marked by uniformly gloomy, dark, and depressing economic reports. It has gotten so we expect to hear disheartening statistics about unemployment rates, economic growth rates, and interest rates. And this is true not only in America, but in the majority of the world's countries. The world economy has been underwater for three years. I'm sure when the historians write the history of this time period it will be regarded as a dark and uncertain time for most of the world's people.

That struck me as I read the opening lines of today's Old Testament lesson: "See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples." [*Isaiah 60:1-6*] Although it was written in the 8th C. BC, 2800 years ago, it seems an apt description of the state of affairs of the world today.

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of Our Lord, the visit of Magi, Wise Men, from the East, to worship the newborn King of kings. It's a very special day for those of us of non-Jewish heritage because Epiphany celebrates the fact that while the Savior came from the Jews, He came not just for the Jews, but for all people. In a real sense, Epiphany is – and is often celebrated as – the Gentile Christmas.

The economic news of the past few days has been a little brighter. Unemployment is down a bit – 8.5% -- but that is an improvement. The stock market is in pretty good shape, and oil prices are down. So commentators are beginning to see a light at the end of the economic tunnel.

That, too, is reminiscent of the lesson from Isaiah: “Arise, shine for your light has come....”

Of course, Isaiah was not writing about economic conditions in the US; he was not even referring to economic conditions in Israel at that time. He was talking about the coming of the long-promised Messiah, the Savior of the world.

From the time of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden, God had promised that He would send a Savior to mend the relationship between God and man which Adam and Eve had broken, and which their offspring continued to trample.

Isaiah refers to the coming of that Savior, which would not happen for another 700 years, as the coming of light to a darkened world, a world darkened by sin and death and the presence of Satan.

This Messiah would come as the person we know as Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth we just celebrated. In a few months we will gather to commemorate His death, the death by which He

took the full punishment for our sins and paid the price for our salvation. And three days after that we will celebrate His resurrection from the dead, God's clear and undeniable promise that He accepted Jesus sacrifice as full payment for our sins, and that the relationship broken in the Garden was re-established once again. Henceforth, all who put their trust in Jesus would have forgiveness and eternal life as a free gift by God's grace through faith in Jesus.

That is the light of which Isaiah writes. It is a brilliant, dazzling light which searches out and exposes evil and sin, and which brightens the dark corners of our hearts and minds and changes our perspective on all things.

It struck me that even in the midst of this economic quagmire, this is not a land of gloom and darkness. We are among the countries to which the Gospel has come and been shared openly and widely. The light of God has shone on this country since its conception because this has always been a place where the Gospel has been proclaimed. That is why, even in the midst of politically or economically dark times, this has been a land of light.

One cannot say that of all countries. There are still many nations in which other, false religions hold sway, lands in which the light of the Gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus is a dimly flickering lamp, or has never been seen at all.

People need to hear that Good News today more than ever before. And people are hungry to hear it. Especially among the young there seems to be a growing feeling that something is missing. Young married couples are returning to church, or coming for the first time. Older people are entering middle age or senior citizen status sensing that something has been missing for a long time. They're not experiencing that contentment and peace that they worked for their whole lives.

At the same time there is a growing darkness, as well, a growing anger at Christianity and the Church by those outside it. It is, in many ways, more difficult to be a Christian than at any time in my lifetime, and, perhaps, in the last 200 years.

Still, more than 70% of Americans claim to be Christians. That's an astounding statistic that makes America one of the most, if not the most Christian nations in the world. The Light shines here! Even in the midst of a plodding economy, high unemployment, and a contentious presidential election process, the Light shines in America.

That is something not to be minimized. It is, as it was for Israel when Isaiah prophesied it, a great blessing – and a blessing to be shared.

This year we will emphasize the Ablaze movement more strongly at Grace. Each of us is called upon to do several things:

First, pray for those we know who don't have the light of Christ in their lives;

Second, pray for opportunities to share our faith so that that light may begin to shine for them;

Third, take those opportunities when they come, and share what having that light in our lives means to us;

Fourth, share those seized opportunities, those Gospel contacts, with the congregation so that we can all pray for them, and, also so that we can count them toward our church body's goal of shining that light into the lives of 100 million people by Oct. 31, 2017.

Last year, our Church Council set a goal of 500 Gospel contacts by members and friends of Grace in 2011. We didn't really follow up on that challenge. Let's commit to that number this year. Let's pray for opportunities, and take the opportunities God gives to shine the light of God's grace and salvation into the lives of those we know, 500 times, at a minimum.

God gave us the Light to save us, but He also intended that it be spread around. As in the words of the old camp song, let's not hide our lights under a bushel, but rather let them shine so that others may see, and like the Wise Men, may follow our light to Him who is the Light, Jesus, our Savior.

And the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, be and abide with you all. Amen.

