

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for The First Sunday After Christmas Day
January 2, 2011
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

It is somewhat ironic that our lighting system should fail today at a time of year when our thoughts are on the Light that shines in the darkness. Since we will not be observing the Feast of Epiphany on January 6, we have chosen the Gospel for Epiphany for today's service.

Like the prophets before us, we have been visited with visions of darkness covering the earth, and thick darkness covering the peoples. We have seen the darkness in the streets of Haiti in the aftermath of natural disaster. We have seen the plumes of darkness rising above the mountains, villages, and cities of Afghanistan where human disaster continues. Some darkness we only hear about: drug warfare and brokenness in most of our urban centers; hatred and bigotry flourishing on the Internet; the extremes of religious fundamentalism of all kinds just about everywhere.

But we are not the first people to see the darkness. And we are not the first to hope for a time when the darkness in our world will be dispelled by light. The prophets had visions light: new light; the Lord's light rising upon us. We read of Wise Men in a far-off place searching the night skies for a sign of new life. They hoped to glimpse multiple signs of light piercing our darkness as some sort of sign, perhaps, that the universe wants to move out of darkness and into light. The very presence of all of those people waiting in the quiet darkness was itself a sign of humanity's yearning, its hope, its capacity to imagine and dream of a light that cannot be overcome by any darkness.

We who come to this service today know something of this light of the Lord's. Like the Wise Men before us, we come to bring our gifts to lay at the birth place of this light, or at least we have some memory of having that motivation at some point in time when we got out of bed on Sunday morning. It may be because of the witness of those first Wise Men that we even know the light at all.

Or we may know of the light because of the stewardship of one individual who himself once fought against the light; a person who was a publicly-proclaimed enemy of the light; a soldier of the princes of darkness; a person who was the least likely of all people to be given "the Stewardship of God's grace" for our sake and for the sake of the whole world. This unlikely person was called Saul of Tarsus. When the light dawned upon him, it transformed him. The change in him was so remarkable that he required a new name – Paul.

As we hear today, Paul is the one who announces that we who are non-Jews were chosen "in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love" and "partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Of this Gospel, of this Good News, Paul was made a minister according to God's grace. And that is the paradox that resides deep within Epiphany: we are made, through Christ, to be both those who bring our gifts to offer him and those who receive the gift of God's grace to be ministers and stewards of the Gospel ourselves. As Paul himself notes, this grace was given to him, the "very least of all the saints," so that he might share the "unsearchable riches of Christ" and help all people to know that it is God who creates all things, not we ourselves.

One of the focal points of Epiphany is our Baptism. Through Baptism we are, each of us, given gifts by God. The greatest of these gifts are the gifts of God's Spirit and God's Grace. We are not all given

the same gifts, but all that we have is a gift from God. The Outline of Faith (the Catechism) found in the Book of Common Prayer says, on page 855, that "according to the gifts given to us we are to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world." That is, no one is expected to do or give anything more than one has been gifted by God to do or give.

Epiphany reminds us that the life of faith is a life of accepting, acknowledging, and giving thanks for those gifts God has so freely given to us and of employing those gifts to continue Christ's work -- the work of reconciliation. Like those Wise Men who came before us, we are people who search the heavens for signs of hope and reconciliation among all the peoples of earth. We look for shooting traces of light in the darkness that seems so deep. Like the prophets, we are people who imagine that one day we shall arise and be radiant, and like Paul, come to know that even when we are feeling small and unworthy in the great scheme of God's grace and glory, the stewardship of God's grace has been given to us. In fact, I'm not sure it is possible for anyone to mature in the faith until one becomes aware of the darkness of his or her own heart and recognizes the need for the light of grace to shine in that darkness – the darkness that is the abode of the demons of inadequacy, imperfection, fear, enmity, shame, hatred, and all the others. God's grace is a gift; the ultimate gift; the gift that embraces us and heals us, darkness and all, enlightening us, inspiring us, and empowering us to do the humanly impossible.

And like Paul and the Wise Men before us, we will come to know that gifts only have life and meaning when they are taken, blessed, broken, and shared with others. This is the very heart of the life of Thanksgiving. A life of Eucharist revolves around our fidelity to a way of life that transcends understanding; a life of employing and deploying the gifts we receive to complete Christ's work in the world and bring to fulfillment the sanctification of all life and all creation. Freely we have received and freely we must give!

Because strangers in a far-off country once searched the heavens for a sign, we are here now and we know something of the light that can drive away all darkness. Because of the stewardship of one individual, once an avowed enemy of the light, we are here and have been made One Body with the Light. Because of our fidelity to a way of life that transcends understanding, and because of our stewardship of God's grace and the Good News of God in Christ Jesus, the whole world shall see and be radiant with the Light. The hearts of all people shall thrill and rejoice! If only, as Isaiah and the Wise Men implore us, we lift up our eyes and see!

The unsearchable riches of Christ have been given to us so that we might give them to others, that all persons everywhere might be reconciled one to another; and that the glory of the Lord might shine throughout all the earth. People don't emanate light; they reflect it. God doesn't ask you to create a light but to reflect the light he gives you. I have a little piece of one way glass upon which is inscribed a prayer of Robert Schuller: "Lord, make my life a window through which your light may shine and a mirror to reflect your love to everyone I meet." That is a radical and revolutionary prayer. It transcends sentimentality. It is impatient with excuses for ignoring the darkness – like poverty, war, bigotry, hunger. It is about more than being well-behaved and polite. Its essence is fully (radically) expressed in the One the Magi came to see; the One who grew up; the One who brought the light to the dark corners of the human heart in ways that got him crucified. Thanks be to God that his Light has shined upon us and scatters the darkness from before our path.