

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - February 9, 2020 - Your Light Isaiah 58:1, 8-12 and Matthew 5:13-20

With a quick glance at the cover of your bulletin this morning, you see that we are now gathered in the Christian season following Epiphany. Church historians tell us that early Christians began celebrating Epiphany prior to any formal celebrations related to the birth of Christ. ¹ This means that Epiphany, rather than the fanfare of Advent or Christmas, was the original focal point.

Wise men from the east followed the star's light, becoming the first to honor Christ's divinity. From there, Epiphany moves swiftly toward a recounting of Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his earthly ministry. ² And all along the way, light is a central theme. Reminiscent of the period following Jesus' resurrection, darkness and gloom are dispelled. Evil is renounced. Sinners repent. And the righteous are set free to walk in the light of God's intentions for all the earth.

That these themes recur with such frequency is a reminder of how enduring our temptations have become. Of how easy it is to be filled with intentions that are

¹ Ken Evers-Hood, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1, Advent through Epiphany*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 228.

² Evers-Hood, 228.

not in keeping with our Christian principles and convictions. Of how quick we are to lose ourselves amid shrouds of darkness.

Just consider for a moment your own relationships. Perhaps you know someone, or maybe even a number of individuals, who seem to believe that their status is somehow elevated through the act of denigrating others. People like this are confident in their own righteousness and are scornful of their neighbors. Typically, their lives are filled with complaints and grievances.

Jesus was aware of this tendency, so he once told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee was sitting in the temple praying to God, “I thank you, God, that I am not like other people - cheaters, sinners, and adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector!” The tax collector, meanwhile, was intently focused on God - contrite, humble, and repentant. In response, Jesus said, “I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Friends, Jesus understood that the denigration of others is not a show of strength, but a sign of insecurity. Not a display of confidence, but a demonstration of brokenness. Yes, pride puffs up, the apostle Paul reminds us, but “love builds up.” And love, says Jesus, is about letting our light shine.

Today, we have become so familiar with the teachings of Jesus that we often forget about how countercultural he really was. For comparison's sake, just consider the examples found in Greek mythology. In the Greek myths, deities were set apart from followers through the same faulty logic that I described earlier. In other words, it was through the denigration of the people that the deities were thought to be elevated.

Jesus, however, recognized that “to denigrate creation is to denigrate its Creator.”³ So rather than buying into the Greco-Roman myth of denigrating humankind, he actually chose to become one of us. He assumed the human form as his own, and walked alongside our spiritual ancestors. He broke bread with them. He physically touched and healed them. In these, and so many other ways, Jesus provided a powerful reminder that God is not offended by our humanity.

And then, Jesus went even further saying, “you are the light of the world.”⁴ Yes. “You are the light of the world.” Do you hear how empowering that is? Here, Jesus provides instructions to his disciples to rise up, to lift our voices in praise, and

³ Zaida Maldonado Perez, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1, Advent through Epiphany*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 241.

⁴ Perez, 241.

to let our lights shine, for we - we - are being entrusted with the good news of the kingdom of God.

In Northeastern Ohio, we have had an unusually mild winter. I recognize the irony of my claim, with snow and ice on the ground even now. But the temperatures in December and January were warmer than usual. For weeks, rain was as likely as snow. And in January, several people commented to me that there was a feeling of spring in the air.

Even so, sunny days have been in short supply. And in the midst of the darkness, it is natural for us to long for a time when rays of light will shine forth from the heavens and bring to fruition the color and majesty of spring. Here we find a fitting metaphor for the kingdom of God. For just as the sun's rays do not discriminate between individuals, providing light to unlikely places and welcoming all to its benefits, so are we to live as the people of God, letting our light shine in the midst of darkness, for this is our reflection of God's reign. ⁵

Today, we will gather at the Lord's Table, elevated in the sight of God as

⁵ Perez, 241.

practitioners of the light. May they know that we are Christians by our love. All
thanks be to God. Amen.