

“GOT A LIGHT?”

A SERMON PREACHED ON THE OBSERVANCE
OF THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY
JANUARY 8, 2006
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Appointed texts:

First Lesson:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD. For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the LORD your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you. Isaiah 60:1-6, 9

Gospel text:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Matthew 2:1-12

"Arise, shine, for your light has come ... Lift up your eyes and look around ... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice."

As far as popular cultural superstitions go, thirteen is not a lucky number. Recently I disconnected some lighting in my home to do some renovations, and when I tried to wire things back together again the lights didn't work. So I'm sitting in darkness.

I don't troubleshoot electrical problems. Plumbing is one thing. If I make a mistake, things just leak. Getting unlucky with electricity is another matter. So I've called a qualified electrician to solve my problem. We both laughed nervously when I scheduled him for his next available appointment this Friday. It's Friday, the thirteenth.

On a far more serious note, last week's "Unlucky Thirteen" was first the sum total of twelve miners alive and one dead; then, a few hours later, it was one survivor and a dozen casualties. They say the cause of the methane gas explosion two miles under a West Virginia hillside last week is now under investigation.

First reports indicate the cause of the explosion, which appears to have occurred in a vacant section of the mine that had been sealed with 40-inch-thick concrete just last month, remains a mystery. Experts said many possibilities exist, including a lightning strike (?), or a spark from the miners' equipment igniting trapped methane gas.

"I wanted to believe." West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin was quoted saying when he'd first heard the erroneous report that 12 miners had survived the explosion. As he was leaving the local Baptist church directly across from the mine, he'd replied positively, "Miracles do happen."

But not this time, as things turned out. One angry, distraught townswoman told a reporter, "We're Christian. We're good Christian folk around here. We may be dumb, West Virginia mountain people around here; but when they give you a miracle and then take it away again, it makes you wonder if there is a Lord."

So, in Sago, West Virginia, some wonder now if there really is a Lord. Or, if there is a Lord, then there's the usual nagging doubter's question as to why the Almighty chose to remain painfully absent in the case of such dire need.

It certainly seems people are sometimes quick to want to identify the hand of the Lord acting directly in their lives; particularly when it suits their own predisposed wants and desires.

For example, from two divergent perspectives as televangelist Pat Robertson to some west-bank Palestinians last week, each had their own reasons for wanting to see the hand of God at work in the critical medical condition that has rendered Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at death's door. So, folks are sometimes quick to want to identify the hand of the Lord acting directly in their lives. But where could the hand of the Lord be found in Sago? Where was the Lord? Where was the light?

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The seeming hoax played on those who wanted to believe in miracles is the kind of thing that has led some others to become complete non-believers. In a little town a few miles north of Rome a judge has ordered a priest to prove the existence of Christ; or at least the fact that Jesus ever really existed.

According to a *London Times* article last week, there are certain laws in Italy, and punishable offense for “impersonation” and “abuse of popular credulity.” A man by the name of Luigi Cascioli, author of a book called *The Fable of Christ*, began legal proceedings against Father Enrico Righi three years ago after the priest denounced Signor Cascioli in the parish newsletter for questioning Christ’s historical existence. Last week a judge in the town of Viterbo, set a preliminary hearing for the end of this month and ordered Father Righi to appear, after Signor Cascioli lodged his accusations of “abuse of popular credulity” and “impersonation.” The Vatican has so far declined to comment.

For those of us who may be reluctant to go to any such extremes, my message is for those who peer into the manger and wonder about miracles; who want to believe in the credulity of Jesus as the Christ, and the “light of the world.” This message is for those who are not yet ready to believe there is no light in the darkness; even while we remember the night the light went out in Sago, and pray for those who mourn the darkness that envelopes that mining community.

Comfortably removed from their darkness and pain, we can look at the media’s images of a drab and dreary West Virginia coal town, a company town, where you work in the mines or you don’t work. There, in the dead of winter, just after the holidays and with a new year that’s always full of hope and the possibility of a better life, it’s only one day into the new year when the lights go out.

There’s mountain fog, and a cold, penetrating, bone-chilling sleet that hangs in the air. Two miles down in the depths of the earth, there’s good money to be made with a dangerous job in place where breathable air and toxic gases can mix, and a sudden, inadvertent spark can turn it all into a darkened tomb.

As a boy I remember family trips to the Chicago Museum of Science & Industry, and what these days we would call an “interactive” coal mine exhibit. Riding in little rail carts we would rumble down, down, down into darkness. Then in dim light we’d peer into this exhibit and imagine for a few minutes what it might be like to be a miner. You’d spend your days in the shadows, always digging; only to emerge at the end of the day when night-fall welcomes you once again to the land of the living. Yet for the rest of us looking to fill our furnaces and winter fireplaces, from the mines – after the digging, and the clawing, and the shoveling and the soot – would come the coal, the source of energy, and light and warmth.

There’s a powerful metaphor here for a preacher in all of that; especially when it is juxtaposed to another image we read this morning from the prophet, Isaiah, where “darkness covers the land,” and “deep gloom enshrouds the people.”

But then this call: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you.” ...“over you the Lord will rise, and his glory will appear upon you. Nations will stream to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawning. ... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice ...”

You might say, on the surface of it all, some poor and poorly-educated West Virginia coal miners, and three biblical “wise” men, or kings, astrologers from the ancient, exotic Orient would have little in common. Yet both went digging, in a way; both sought a miracle, of sorts. And both were – in the end – left with something else.

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They all sought the kind of miracles that would prove something; and, in that regard, they were left with a miracle that could prove little. But the wise – having been forewarned in a dream of something different, reflected in the joy they’d found beneath the brightest star – left for home by another way.

As Matthew tells the story, the strangers had followed a light, a new light, a distant light, millions and millions of miles away; a light so far away those who sought a sign could only dream of ever grasping it.

They’d followed a new star; and when they reached the place beneath that light -- to their utter surprise and amazement -- they found what they could never have imagined illumined for them. And, they were overcome with joy. Then they exchanged gifts. In return for the gift they received they offered their best, finest, richest gifts; including gold from the mines. Then they withdrew, and “went home by another way.”

In the Church, the liturgical season of Epiphany (“light all around us”), begins with a distant star aligning itself over a Bethlehem stall and an infant born to peasant parents. The season always ends with the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord on the mountaintop; where – as the story goes – Jesus’ outward appearance changes.

The greater change, of course, takes place in the hearts, and minds and lives of those disciples who have followed him to the mountaintop. You might say with all their digging to get to the bottom of things, as well as their scanning the heavens above, their new vision of him was revealed in another, unimaginable and amazing way. Even more so it led them on a different path to understanding themselves as faithful followers. Everything was sharpened and came into clearer focus before his radiant light.

So now, in between manger and transfiguration, here is a season of hearing once again the stories of his words and teaching, his healing miracles and exorcisms, that tell us something of who this Lord and light is. So we will dig a little deeper, and seek little further.

Where is this Lord, if there really is a Lord, some ask in their understandable doubt and despair? In the end, perhaps a deeper and more illuminating question for this season is this: Got a light? What’s your light? Or, better, *who’s* your light?

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If Jesus is your light, what is it that he illumines for you? What does he do, and what does he say? Who is he? And finally then, what does he ask of you, if you are to walk as “a child of that light?”