

“Light Shining in Darkness”
Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians 3:1-12 Matthew 2:1-12

Listening to the words of Isaiah, it is very clear that the prophet had a profound sense of the interplay between the glaring brightness of a light that was shining in thick darkness. Listen to his words again:

“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 rise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.” (Isaiah 60:1,2)

I had a graphic experience of this. It was a week or so before Christmas. In the evening I was laying down on the couch, indulging myself by watching the Magic play basketball. Funny, now that I think about it, I can’t even remember who they were playing that night. I do remember what I was thinking about.

For some time now, I have had the spiritual discipline of praying regularly in the morning, and it is unusual for me to miss that rhythm in my life. It is important to me; it is important to my ministry; but even more than that, it is important to my relationship with God. It is a time when I express my intention to consent to God’s presence and action within me. It is a time when I practice letting go. It is not a time to plan my day, although that is important. It is not a time to think up brilliant sermon illustrations, I can always use more of those. It is simply a time to pray.

I have come to the place in my life where I also realize that I still need teachers so I have placed myself under some teachers who guide me in this practice of prayer. I listen to them regularly. I read what they have to say. I spend time with them praying with them. All the things you do with a teacher. They are patient with me. They are encouraging to me. They challenge me.

For several years now these teachers have been saying that the relationship behind this practice of prayer would be enhanced if I would practice this intentional time of prayer not just once but two times each day. And for several years now, I have been thinking that this was a good idea.

And, this past year I have experienced a bit of success in that direction. I keep track of myself because I know myself well enough to know that I am a real pro at fooling myself. So, to be honest, I have made progress, but I have fallen short of, as one of my teachers puts it, “putting some teeth in my intention.”

So, there I was watching the Magic basketball, thinking to myself, “Stephen, you haven’t prayed a second time today yet, so perhaps after they get a comfortable lead you could switch off the television and get some prayer time in, but even though they were winning the lead was under ten points, soooo.” I am not proud of the way I think at times, but that is exactly the way I was thinking, when, in a twinkling of an eye, everything went black.

Boy, was it dark. This was thick darkness. All of a sudden my sense of priorities changed. The Magic’s lead didn’t seem that important. I was grateful that I could fumble around to find some matches to light a candle and then make my way to the kitchen where we kept the flashlight.

I can be so self-centered. I just knew that God had been reading my thoughts, so I walked outside to see if anyone else's home had been affected. Up and down our street, thick darkness. At least God hadn't singled me out. Because the power was out, the telephone didn't work. Thank goodness for cell phones. I called Tim Mercurio to see if they had power. They live on the north side of tenth avenue. Their lights were still on so I decided that meant that this was localized to our neighborhood, and it would probably just be a little while before the power came back on, but I might as well seize the moment, so I said to Christine, "I think I will pray now. Would you like to join me?"

So, this scripture "darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness shall come upon the peoples" has an immediate meaning for me, and so does "but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you."

So, to any of you who live in our neighborhood and also experienced your power going out before Christmas, I apologize for your inconvenience, that was just God getting my attention.

Funny, thing, it was within one minute after our twenty minutes in prayer, that, bingo, the lights came back on again.

It is very rare for us living today to experience literal thick darkness, but in Biblical times that was just the way it was. The night sky that the wise men were attentively scanning was much darker than our sky. They were clearly men of faith who were well acquainted with putting teeth into their intentions. They embodied the truth of Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you."¹

Let's set the stage for these spiritual seekers. Matthew begins his gospel by tracing the genealogy of Jesus. He has a specific reason for doing so. He begins with Abraham, the Father of faith and traces the family directly through king David through the displacement of the deportation to Babylon. There is a precise orderliness to all of this. So there is no doubt as to Jesus authentic kingship, but this orderliness seems disrupted by Mary's seeming untimely pregnancy, yet Joseph, to whom she is engaged is himself engaged in a dream, and Joseph changed his intention because of his dream. And Jesus is born.

It is right then in Matthew's gospel that these wise men appear. This is curious because they know nothing of the child's genealogy. They know nothing of the prophecy about Bethlehem yet when they appear in Jerusalem not only King Herod but everyone else in power acted as if they had just been warned of a terrorist attack. They convened their security councils, yet they still could not bring themselves to have the humility to be humble seekers like these wise men who had travelled so far. Perhaps the first question of faith this new year is, "What will it take for us to put teeth into our intentions?"

I heard a story about a king of a kingdom by the name of Balkh. Balkh is what is now northern Afghanistan. This king's name was Ebrahim and by every way you can measure he was very wealthy. He is one of the saints of Islam.

The story goes that "One night the king was roused from sleep by a fearful stomping on the roof above his bed. Alarmed, he shouted: 'Who's there?' 'A

¹ Matthew 7:7

friend,' came the reply from the roof. 'I've lost my camel.' Perturbed by such stupidity, Ebrahim screamed: 'You fool! Are you looking for a camel on the roof?' 'You fool!' the voice from the roof answered. 'Are you looking for God in silk clothing, and lying on a comfortable bed?' The story goes on to tell how these simple words filled the king with such terror that he arose from his sleep to become a most remarkable saint. He became motivated to put some teeth into his intentions and became a man known for his great compassion.

I love the way Matthew tells the story with such simplicity and a subtle but very significant shift in tone. When King Herod is consulting with all the power brokers and giving his instructions to the wise men the story is dripping with underlying motives and hidden agendas, and the wise men listened to all of that, but as soon as they left Jerusalem the shining star again guided their way and with a child like exuberance they were filled with joy when they saw that the star had stopped. I am not even going to try to explain to you how one sees that a star has stopped – just as I could not explain to you how one is overwhelmed with joy. It is just something you have to experience in your heart, and sometimes it is in the thickest darkness that the star shines the brightest.

St Augustine puts it this way, "If you can understand it, then it is not God. If you were able to understand then you understood something else instead of God. If you were able to understand even partially then you deceived yourself with your own thoughts."²

These wise men had the humility and modesty of spirit to enter the humble place where they found the child with his mother Mary and they knelt and worshipped and opened their treasures and they left with less than they came and were content to find their way home by another route. They left with the love of the child within them, Emmanuel.

Their way was not about an excessive and obsessive concern with prosperity and security, but a willingness to be vulnerable enough to be led, humble enough to be neighborly to the least among them, radical enough to express generosity in all their transactions, and content enough to accept a future where spears would be turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares.

I found another story about camels called "Seventeen Camels" that tells of a wealthy man who died and left his seventeen camels to be divided among his three sons. One was to receive one ninth; one was to get one half; and the third son was to inherit one third of the camels. Seventeen camels, however, aren't evenly divisible by three. Hence the three sons argued long and loud about what to do. In desperation they agreed to let a certain wise man decide for them. He was known to be wise even though he was of very modest means. They found him seated in front of his tent with his own camel staked out back. After hearing the case, the wise man took his own camel and added it to the other seventeen camels. He then took one ninth of the eighteen, or two camels. To another he gave one half, or nine camels. To the third he gave one third, or six camels. On top of it all, he still had his own camel left.

² Sermon 52.

Many of us try to find God and solve the problems of life by logical, calculating schemes that insure we receive our share. We are motivated more by our fear than by our faith. But God is to be found in receiving, not grasping; in giving, not claiming our rights.

That is the gospel we proclaim on this first Sunday of 2010.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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