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BRIEF STUDIES

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

ED. NOTE: These studies will serve either as suggestions for a special series of Epiphanytide messages or as resource for all Epiphany and mission preaching.

JOHN 8:12

"Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee" (Is. 60:1). This prophetic Epiphany exultation was realized in the birth of Jesus Christ. "The people that sat in darkness saw a great light, and to them that sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up." In these post-Epiphany days let us consider the proclamation of Jesus: "I am the Light of the World."

The pronoun "I" carries the accent, as though Jesus had said: "The Light of the world am I, no one else." Of course, for most people of His day, He did not look like a light, but at best like a dying ember in the hearth. He was a tiny, helpless Infant. He was sought out by Herod and other enemies. He was poor and unknown. He was taunted: "You are a Samaritan" (John 8:48); "He has a demon, and He is mad" (John 10:20); "You are blaspheming" (John 10:33); "How knoweth this Man letters, having never learned?" (John 7:15). At best He was a riddle for His contemporaries: "There was much muttering among the people. While some said, 'He is a good man,' others said, 'No, He is leading the people astray'" (John 7:12, 13). And so He was arrested, tried as a rebel and blasphemer, scourged, spit upon, crucified, and laid into the grave. And yet He could say, and He said it more than once: "The Light of the world am I," as though with such undertones as not Herod, not Pilate, not Caiaphas, not other princes among the Jewish religious leaders. Perhaps He even thought of such lights as Ahura-Mazda, Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, Plato, and others. "The Light of the world am I."

And He truly is the Light of the world that shines in darkness. He is the Alpha and Omega of God's revelation to man in His holy Book. He is the Mediator of creation, the Mediator of redemption, the Consummator of all things. Foretold long ago by God's messengers, the prophets, His conception and birth were announced by God through an angel. He was identified as the Christ, the Lamb of God, the Son of God, by John the Baptist. He was declared by the Father to be His beloved Son at the Jordan and the Holy Mount and was mightily confirmed as the Father's Son through the resurrection and exaltation to the Father's right hand. He was feared by demons, worshiped and served by angels, believed on by timid disciples. He was the Conqueror of death and devil, grave and hell; the second Adam, who fulfilled all righteousness. He was superior to the Law, to Abraham, to Moses, to Aaron and his high-priestly successors; to John the Baptist. He is the eternally valid Sacrifice for the sin of the world. He is greater than the temple and synagog, greater than all angels and all other creatures visible and invisible. He was the one

true Messiah as opposed to 14 false Jewish Messiahs and other Messiahs. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords; the Judge to come; the pre-existent Word of God, active already in the history of the O.T. people; the exact image of God; God Himself, though God become incarnate. Only He could say, as Augustine reminds us, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

There have been many major and minor lights in the world: religious leaders, philosophers, scientists, artists, statesmen, military geniuses, and dictators. But only He could say, "The Light of the world am I." And He could say it in all truthfulness, He needed no witnesses. He had perfect knowledge of Himself, a knowledge never shared by anyone else. His signs validated His words, and His words validated His signs. Only He irradiated and irradiates human existence with the knowledge of its true nature, meaning, and purpose. For apart from Him no man succeeded to dispel that awful gloom which settles on man's heart when he honestly reflects: What am I? Who am I? What is existence? What does it mean that I exist? And if I exist, why do I exist? Whence came I? Whither am I going? None found a way to leap across the high wall of his own imprisoned life. None discovered how man might escape the dark shadows of a haunting conscience. None succeeded in penetrating the black clouds of despair. Only He could say, "The Light of the world am I. He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life."

Many years ago Charles Ross Weede wrote a poem in which he compares Jesus with Alexander. But the poet might have compared Jesus with any other great light in history.

The poem reads:

Jesus and Alexander died at 33;
 One lived and died for self; one died for you and me.
 The Greek died on a throne; the Jew died on a cross;
 One's life a triumph seemed; the other but a loss.
 One led vast armies forth; the other walked alone;
 One shed a whole world's blood; the other gave His own.
 One won the world in life and lost it all in death;
 The other lost His life to win the whole world's faith.

Jesus and Alexander died at 33.
 One died in Babylon, and one on Calvary.
 One gained all for self, and Himself He gave;
 One conquered every throne; the other every grave.
 The one made himself God, but God made Himself less.
 The one lived but to blast; the other but to bless.
 When died the Greek, forever fell his throne of swords,
 But Jesus died to live forever Lord of lords.

In the heavenly light and glory of the Epiphany season and at the threshold of this new year of our Lord, may everyone of us again be drawn to that Light, believe in that Light, walk in that Light, and have eternal life in that Light. Amen.

JOHN 1:5

Light shines, that is, it becomes manifest or visible. Light shines in darkness, that is, it becomes manifest and visible only when enshrouded by darkness. These are, of course, platitudes. But some platitudes at the same time conceal and reveal most basic truths which men can know or which God wants them to know.

Jesus says in John 12:46: "I am come a light into the world that whosoever believeth on Me should not abide in darkness." This means that He came into a dark world. It means also that in this dark world His light became manifest and visible. He did not come into the world like a huge dark funnel-shaped tornado, or like a black howling hurricane, or like an unseen sneaking, sizzling, slithering bomb from a high altitude of whose sudden presence men became aware only because of its dissemination of death and destruction. Jesus came as a light into the world, a world of darkness. "The people that sat in darkness saw a great *light*, and to them which sat in the region of the shadow of death *light* is sprung up." (Matt. 4:12)

It was a dark world into which Jesus came; a dark, impenetrable, opaque darkness had settled on the world; a denser darkness than the darkness that once enveloped the land of Egypt. It was the darkness of sin in all its frightful manifestations. Some of these sins Paul catalogs in Rom. 1 and 1 Tim. 1: "Impurity, dishonoring their bodies among themselves, exchanging the truth of God for a lie, worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator; filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, deceit, malignity, gossips, slanderer, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless; profane, murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, manslayers, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers." It was a world which had completely drifted away from its Creator into the errors of its own false ways leading to eternal destruction. Into such a world of darkness that Light came. It pointed up for the world the awfulness of sin and the reality of sin. But it also removed from man the guilt and punishment of sin when that Light went out on the cross, descended into the darkness of the grave, but again burned with renewed and grander splendor when it arose from the dead and brought life and immortality to light. And since that time it has brought light to man living in darkness through the children of light, that is, through those who believed in that light and are no longer walking in darkness.

"The Light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not." This is both a judgment over darkness and a paean of victory. A judgment: because John had seen in his lifetime that the world of darkness had not submitted to that Light, refused to be illuminated by it, but rather rose in revolt against that Light and tried to extinguish it. John remembered that continuous war between light and darkness, Christianity and Judaism, Christianity and paganism, Christianity and Gnosticism. He could have recalled the hostile attitude of the Jewish Council, his own and Peter's trial before that council, the martyrdom of Stephen and of his own brother James, the threatenings and slaughter breathed out against that Light by one Saul of Tarsus, his own trials in Ephesus as a bearer of that Light.

All this stirred him. And yet he concluded: "The Light still shines in darkness, and the darkness did not put it out." And so he voiced this grand paean of victory, of joy and thanksgiving.

This verse might well be placed at the head of every book on church history. For church history records that bitter struggle between the darkness of the world and the "Light of the world." It tells of defeats and victories. But the final conclusion of church history is: "The darkness did not put it out." Persecution after persecution; one pagan philosophy followed by another pagan philosophy; heresy after heresy, one more insidious and blasphemous than the other; one school of criticism succeeded by another school of criticism—all failed in the endeavor to put out that light. Each had its day, and some of its one-time brilliant exponents are known today only by their names. One attack of science after another has not been able to destroy that Light. All together: persecutions, philosophies, heresies, critical theories, scientific discoveries had oftentimes dimmed that Light, hemmed it in and limited its sphere of influence—but they failed to put it out. The Light still shines in darkness.

That Light does, in reality, still shine in the darkness of this black world. Its light seems particularly bright and brilliant at the present time. When we reflect on the incredible expansion of the LUTHERAN HOUR—and those of us who have been in foreign lands were compelled to take note of its impact—when we think of the renewed interest in Biblical theology; when we think of the ever-growing army of foreign missionaries sponsored by the Christian Church, by our Synod, and some by theological students; when we think of the personal interest of so many of our lay people in the evangelism program, then we again take heart, and we say with John, "The Light shineth in darkness," all modern skepticism, materialism, idealism, scientism, educationism, humanism notwithstanding.

For this indisputable fact we need to thank God in this Epiphany season. Conscious of that fact, and having ourselves come to faith in that light, may we live as children of light. May we also become light-bearers, torches carrying forward the message of the light of the world. And while it is true as Bernard of Morlas sang more than 800 years ago:

The world is very evil,
The times are waxing late;
Be sober and keep vigil,
The Judge is at the gate;
The Judge that comes in mercy,
The Judge that comes with might,
To terminate the evil,
To diadem the right,

it also remains everlastingly true: "The Light shineth in darkness, and the darkness has not put it out." Gentiles are still continuing to come to this Light and kings to the brightness of its rising. Amen.

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JOHN 8:12

What a world of meaning lies in the term *world*! What it must have meant to Europeans centuries ago when it dawned on them that Columbus

had discovered a "new" world! What strange emotions did the late Wendell Willkie arouse in the hearts of Americans with his book *One World!* What excitement very early this year when the Russians announced that their latest rocket had actually nosed out of our gravitational world and was heading into other gravitational worlds! What awesomeness grips all of us when we contemplate for a moment that in this vast space there are innumerable worlds, galaxies, heaven next to heaven and heaven above heaven, and that, however swiftly they move, they still remain fixed spheres of gravitational pulls. It is all so mysterious, so incredibly colossal, complicated, and complex that it seems safer to retire from a contemplation of what may or may not be in what we call space and time and what may or may not be measured by the most recently developed huge IBM computers. And yet, in the truest sense, all our concerns resolve themselves when we consider briefly the declaration of Jesus: "I am the Light of the world!"

1. *"I am the Light of all creation"*

"All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3). "The world" involves *all* creation. Jesus is above all creation, ὑπεράνω all heavens as Paul reminds us; seated in God's heaven at God's right hand. There as the Lord God He rules majestically over every created world. There He keeps every planet in its orbit. And when on the Last Day He withdraws His preserving and balancing hand and comes from His Father's throne down into our little planet not again to remove sin but to lead to everlasting glory those who eagerly await His return, then all the planets will cross that dangerous line separating them and the greatest and most awful collisions will result. "We look for and hasten unto the coming of the Day of God wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved and the elements shall melt with fervent heat" (2 Peter 3:12). But of all these worlds Jesus is the Light, and it is only in His light that we gain the true perspective of the vastness and finiteness, the beginning and end, of all creation.

2. *"I am the Light of the world of men"*

Jesus is the Light of men, of all men in our little world, whether Jews or proselytes, Greeks, Samaritans, Romans, and other pagan peoples. Regardless of their differences in historical development, culture, outlook, color, customs, and language, He is the Light of all men. As He created all men through His almighty act, so He preserves them through life with His sustaining power, so He is also the Light of all men inasmuch as He exposes through His revealed Word and His Spirit their darkness, their sinful status before God, leads them to the light of His mercy and salvation, and causes them by His Spirit to live in peace and harmony with one another to the glory of God and the welfare of their fellow men.

3. *"I am the Light which removes the darkness of evil"*

"I have overcome the world. I have overcome the prince of the world, the prince of darkness. I have destroyed his works. I have suffered and died for the hate of the world toward my Father and toward Me. My

treasures are more priceless and enduring than the glitter and pomp of this world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life. I have such treasures as forgiveness, life, salvation, which alone satisfy the weary and puzzled pilgrim making his way through this world, treasures which alone will certify his entrance in the Father's home. I am the Light of the world even though the world still looks dark and dismal, even though it still tempts and allures, even though it still hates you as it hated Me. Let not your heart be troubled neither let it be afraid, for I have overcome the world and the prince of the world. I am the Light also of the theological world. Find Me in all theology, whether systematic, exegetic, historical, practical! If there is a nut which you cannot crack, hurl it against Me, the Rock of Ages, and it will split wide open, and you will have rest for your soul and your mind!"

How could Jesus say of Himself, "I am the Light of the world?" Is it not a breath-taking, preposterous, swollen-headed, schizophrenic declaration made by a megalomaniac? For what good could come out of Nazareth, that unknown little town stuck away in the Galilean hills? How could a Galilean with his broadly slurred vowels, uncouth in his exterior, make so daring a statement? Why even Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammed did not dare to speak thus. Buddha is reported to have said that he was only the rediscoverer of an old and forgotten path, and he urged his followers not to think of him but to concentrate on his teaching. Confucius, with winsome humility, declared that as often as he walked with others three abreast he was sure to find a teacher and asked, "How dare I lay claim to holiness and love?" Mohammed is said to have cried out that unless God should cast the cloak of mercy over him, there was no hope for him at all. And Jesus never recanted! He even declared not only that He spoke the truth but that He was the Truth.

How could Jesus, then, dare to say that He was the Light of the world because in Him was life and the life was the light of men? His life, creative, dynamic, and sustaining, manifests itself as light. But that life and power and light are but the component parts of the glory of God, the Shekinah, the demonstrations of God's presence. The disciples saw the glory at times either in its power or in its light. Jesus is God. As God is Light, so Jesus is the Light of the world.

All this means that we believe, believe in, and follow that Light; that we believe in its creative power to change the hearts of men and by its light to draw men out of the darkness of sin, hate, pride; that we lead others to that Light, remembering at all times that we, too, were sometime darkness.

This is Epiphany! "The people that sat in darkness saw a great light." Have we? "Arise, shine! For thy light is come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." Amen.

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