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Epiphany 2 • Isaiah 49:1–7 • January 19, 2014

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My soul is night, my heart is steel—
I cannot see, I cannot feel;
For light, for life, I must appeal
In simple faith to Jesus.

Thomas Manteufel

Endnote

Today the church faces frustration and failure. A decline of members, a hostile cultural landscape, a disillusioned generation—the church’s labors seem futile. On the one hand, our failures might be attributed to our own shortcomings—we do not always faithfully and fully live in the church’s vocation as a “light unto the nations.” Yet even when we do labor as God’s servant, we do so embodying Christ’s body. We testify to God’s salvation as a body wounded and scarred, often rejected and scorned. But we know that our labor is not in vain. Just as God was faithful to his servant Jesus and raised him from the dead, so we live and bear witness to this undying hope in him. This is the great epiphany—the mystery hidden for ages but now revealed, the surprising “new thing” of God’s salvation!

Erik Herrmann

Editor’s Note: The following homiletical help is adapted from Concordia Journal, October 1998.

Epiphany 3 • Isaiah 9:1–4 • January 26, 2014

Textual considerations: The Old Testament lesson for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany begins with chapter 9 of Isaiah, which contains one of the best-known prophecies of the birth of Christ in Scripture, namely, verses 6 and 7. The first verse of this chapter is a transitional verse as is indicated by the fact that verse 1 of chapter 9 is the final verse of chapter 8 in the Masoretic Text, but is assigned to chapter 9 in the English translations. Verse 1, whether it ends chapter 8 or begins chapter 9, is a key verse in that it helps to set the historical context for the messianic prophecy that begins in verse 2.

Verse 1 looks back to the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom, which included two of the northernmost tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali, in 722–721 B.C. In 701 B.C., the southern kingdom and Jerusalem itself were threatened by the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. Although spared at this time, Judah would eventually fall to the Babylonians almost a century and half later as Isaiah warns.

With the north subjugated, Jerusalem threatened, and eventual captivity certain, a cloud of darkness hung over Jerusalem and Judah because of their sins, especially their apostasy from Yahweh. In that context, Isaiah’s words of hope, “There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress,” were greatly needed and should have been welcome words of comfort.

The opening Janus-like verse of this text (v. 1) looks back to the conquest of two of the northern tribes that fell at the time of King Ahaz and forward to God’s promise of salvation because it was precisely out of this region that the promised Messiah would emerge in the person of Christ, the very Son of God made flesh. It was in this very region of Palestine that Jesus Christ would spend his childhood and begin his ministry. In the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, Jesus performed not only his first miracle.