

The lessons this morning provide for us a bridge, as it were, between Christmas and Epiphany. The events of Christmas occur very much within a Hebrew context. There are a lot of prophecies, particularly from the prophet Isaiah, that are fulfilled. The characters of the story are all Hebrew. Jesus is Circumcised on the eighth day fulfilling the requirements of the Hebrew law. Granted in today's gospel lesson, we do have this episode where the Holy Family escapes to Egypt, mirroring the historic movements both of Abraham and then of the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel in the time of Joseph, but the focus in that story is on the preservation of Jesus, not upon the salvation of Egypt. The narrative is still centered in the life of the people of God.

Today, however, we must note the prominence of the metaphor of light in the collect, and we connect this light to the Nativity narrative via the star that appeared above Bethlehem and led the wise men from the East to the Christ child. Of course, one of our fun traditions following the traditional church calendar is to watch the wise men move slowly from the back of the church toward the creche scene. Today, they are almost there, but haven't quite made it. Tomorrow on the Feast of the Epiphany, also called the Feast of the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the wise men arrive at the manger, completing their long journey. The Christmas tree will come down this week, but we will leave the creche up for another week or two to give them a chance to worship our Incarnate Lord as we move into the Epiphany season.

In some ways, the season of the Incarnation continues all the way to Candlemas on Feb. 2. You will recall the story of the purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary which occurred 40 days after the birth of Jesus. Mary's actions are based upon the law in Leviticus 12 in which a woman who has borne a boy child must come to the temple 40 days after the birth to offer two offerings: one is a sin offering and the other is a whole burnt offering. February 2nd is 40 days after Christmas and thus we celebrate this event at that time. If you recall, on that

occasion aged Simeon took up the baby Jesus in his arms saying, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, ... for mine eyes have seen thy salvation. ... A light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel." The light mentioned by Simeon is represented by our candles during our Candlemas worship. Just a quick aside here that you should order your candles if you would like them blessed during this service a little less than a month away. This is another one of those wonderful traditions that we are heirs to as Anglicans.

So far in this homily, we have pretty much just mapped out our calendar over the next few weeks. But as part of this you will notice the theme of light that pervades this season. Again, we note that this is the darkest and coldest time of year for us here in the northern hemisphere. We miss the longer days and warmer temperatures of Spring and Summer. So during our current season we begin to long for physical light, and this longing also reflects a spiritual need that we all have. Christ, as the light of the world, is that for which we ultimately long. He is the spiritual light sent by God to the world. And He is the Lamb of God which is the light of the City of God in the life of the world to come. Epiphany then, reveals for us in the narrative of Jesus' earthly ministry, just how the light of Christ is manifested, not only to the Jews, but also to the whole world.

Now along with the manifestation of the Light, we also importantly note the enemies of the Light. Satan, of course, has sought to undermine God from the beginning of the world, tempting Eve and then Adam away from faithful obedience to God. Throughout history, Satan and other evil beings, both human and demonic, have sought to snuff out the light of God.

But God will not let the light be extinguished, faint though it may be. In the Nativity, the Light entered in a still small way in the midst of darkness, and met opposition almost immediately in Herod who would brook no rival king. We celebrated the feast of the Holy

Innocents – those boy children caught up in Herod’s demonic scheme and murdered in an attempt to snuff out the light of Christ. Yet we understand that what is a small, seemingly insignificant birth, turns out to be the most significant life in history. The world had been corrupted by sin. It was steeped in spiritual darkness, but God in Christ entered in to drive the darkness away. The ministry of Christ perhaps had the potential to be thwarted, but the darkness would not prevail against the light of God.

The Isaiah prophecy we read for the epistle encapsulates the ministry of Christ for us. Take note of the two verbs at the beginning of the reading. Christ was both anointed and sent. Anointing emphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus. Anointing is a sign of divine selection and gifting. In this passage, anointing is connected with the union of Christ and the Holy Spirit. We know that Jesus was not merely arbitrarily chosen as if any person could fulfill His ministry and accomplish our redemption. He, and only He as fully God and fully man, was established before creation to redeem the humanity that had rebelled against the Creator - that had essentially rebelled against Him.

For us, the verb “sent” in this passage means that the Incarnation, the enfleshment of Divinity in Christ, was an actual event in history. It is not a spiritualized idea. God was born as a baby into this world. He is real, and the healing He brought during His time on earth as one of us and the healing He brings to us today is also real. It is still nothing less than miraculous.

According to Isaiah, Christ would preach good tidings and bind up the brokenhearted. He would proclaim liberty to the captives and free them from their chains. He would proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord which we generally connect with the year of Jubilee. This year came about every 50th years. It was the year after the completion of seven cycles of seven years. During the year of Jubilee, all debts were forgiven and land was returned so that family inheritances would be restored. The year of Jubilee was symbolic of the complete

justice of the kingdom of God. Not only would the innocent sufferers be vindicated, but the wicked would be punished. Those who had sorrowful lives would be blessed, and those in mourning would be made joyful. Christ brings the blessedness of the kingdom of God to our world.

At the end of the Isaiah reading, we see the people of God called trees of righteousness, planted by the Lord. Psalm 1 also uses this imagery for the man who eschews wickedness and follows the Law of God, who follows God Himself.

And he shall be like a tree planted by the water-side, *that will bring forth his fruit in due season.

His leaf also shall not wither; * and look, whatsoever he doeth, it shall prosper.

This metaphor evokes in us images of stability and assurance in chaos. Trees represent endurance against the elements. Those who receive the ministry of the Messiah, of the anointed one, thus enjoy a consistent blessedness of life that glorifies the Lord.

Let us also understand, however, that this is not an individual project. As those who have believed this ministry of Christ and have been baptized into His Body, the Church, and therefore as those who are gifted with the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that we do not live in isolation. We are united to Christ, and therefore we are representatives of Christ to the world.

The collect puts it this way:

ALMIGHTY God, who hast poured upon us the new light of thine incarnate Word;
Grant that the same light enkindled in our hearts may shine forth in our lives; through
Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

So we have received the light of Christ, but in this collect, we are also presented with an expectation. We are expected to let the light of Christ show through us to the world. We are

to be those trees of righteousness which stand against the elements, the vagaries and trials of life. We direct others to the One who has planted us and tended us so that we bear fruit, so that we endure the droughts, and so that we provide shelter and shade.

All of this reminds me of that Sunday school song that most of us probably have learned at some point in our lives. "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." We might chuckle a little at this, but so much of Christian maturity begins by being grateful to Christ for His life in us and then simply sharing that life with others. Perhaps too many of us are hiding our light under a bushel. Perhaps, you this day are afraid to let that light shine too brightly. "Goodness, what will the neighbors think?" Well, might I suggest that we should be more concerned with what Our Lord Jesus Christ thinks than what others think. A little bit of social insensitivity might serve some of us well. Let us try to be a little tone deaf to the raised eyebrows that our love for Jesus might evoke.

Let us end with a few practical suggestions for letting our light shine in 2025. First, as I briefly mentioned already, be grateful, be intentionally grateful. Every life has stress and challenges, but, let us be honest here, we generally survive such things. Focus upon the blessings of life, embrace the work of life (for work is a blessing), give it to God, do all things to His glory. Be the tree of righteousness that has received the loving attention of Christ and blesses the world, standing firmly, battered though it may be, in the storms of life. Make a list of blessings if you have to. Do what you must to become intentionally aware of the many blessings of Christ in your life, and then give Him thanksgiving and praise for these things.

Second, intentionally work for the kingdom. What is your ministry? Do you have an answer for this? Yes, faithful living is a ministry to God, but do you have a ministry for which you have explicitly signed up that serves others? This can be through a ministry here at church on one of the service teams or it can be something outside of church. I know some of the

churches in this area are involved in a food ministry serving the needy. We could put a team together to regularly serve meals. And I am sure there are other opportunities to serve in our community as well. You might be burdened to help young single mothers. Perhaps sign up to help at a local pregnancy resource ministry. Perhaps you have a burden for other needs in our community. Don't keep this burden buried inside, but start looking for ways to meet the needs. God burdens each one of us, and He gifts each one of us for service. Talk to people about it. Take the initiative to love your neighbor however you might be led.

The Kingdom has Come. The grace of Christ, the light of the Incarnate Word, has been poured out upon us. Do not hide the light of Christ, but let it shine brightly to all the world.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.