

January 22, 2017
Isaiah 9:1-4
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“Light to the Nations”

Good morning. Something which I have not acknowledged from this pulpit, but which both Pastor Elizabeth and I appreciate, is the many Christmas cards and blessings we received from you at Creekside. Many of these cards were beautiful, and a few were handmade. The notes and words of encouragement or thanks are something we treasure. I know that many of you share similar sentiments with other members of our church family here at Creekside, and that’s a practice I would affirm for any time of the year. I bring this up because I received a post-Christmas card in the mail this week. There can be so many things to do in the month of December that cards don’t get sent out until after Christmas, and even into the new year. It made me think, as a former greeting card designer, that maybe there would be a niche in the market for an after-Christmas card. A sort of a belated happy Jesus’ birthday card.

It so happens that this card had part of one of my favorite poems on it. Perhaps the only after-Christmas poem that I know. It is written by Howard Thurman, and I remember it because it was set to music by Christian folk artist Jim Strathdee. It fits the season of Epiphany so well that I’m going to sing the first verse and chorus for you. If you want to hear the other verses after the service, just ask me.

**When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and the shepherds have found their way home
The work of Christmas is begun.
I am the light of the world
You people come and follow me!
If you follow and love, you’ll learn the mystery
Of what you were meant to do and be.**

If you have been worshipping with us for the past two weeks of Epiphany, you know that we have been talking about the wise men's journey home from Bethlehem after the joy of finding Jesus. We've been talking about the Hero's Journey: what it means to leave home, what it means to discover our identity and purpose and to grow up. These are journeys not only for warriors and princes -- maybe our image of heroes -- but for regular folks like you and me. We each have our own journey to make: the path to maturity is never a straight line, and by definition there is loss and pain along the way. No one gets to be a grown up by having a pain-free life. Christians recognize that we are on this journey because we have made the choice to follow and imitate Jesus Christ. Christ is our model for what God desires for us, as well as how we ought to behave toward other people. The story of the gospels is the story of what it means to be faithful. Faithful to death, even death on a cross, and how when we are willing to lose our lives -- literally and metaphorically -- we find new life in the kingdom of God. This is the foundational story of Christianity.

So it may seem surprising that our text this morning is from the book of Isaiah: an old Testament prophet writing several hundred years before the birth of Jesus. I bet these words were familiar to many of you, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in the land of deep darkness -- on them has light shined." These words may be so familiar that you thought, "Wait a minute, I thought that was in the New Testament." And you'd be correct. These same words appear in the 4th chapter of Matthew's gospel. Matthew is a Jewish Christian, writing to other Jewish Christians, or to Jews whom he is hoping to convert to Christianity. These words from Isaiah 9 appear in Matthew 4 because Matthew is quoting Isaiah to make the point that Isaiah's prophecy has come to pass. The light of the world is here. The promise of the prophets has been fulfilled; the light has come.

Both Isaiah and Matthew make it clear that this is not a light merely for me individually or personally. Jesus did not come only to light up my world, Jesus is a light to the nations -- Jesus is the light of the world; all the nations and kingdoms. In a week where we have seen the peaceful transition of power in the United States government and

considered what our witness will be to other nations; I think it's important to reflect on the claim that Jesus is the light to the nations. That claim was made for a society that had no separation of church and state. For the prophet Isaiah, nation and religion were the same thing: to be part of the nation of Israel was to be one of God's chosen people, a Jew.

In the United States, as you know, we have a constitutional division between the authority of church and state. But each of us is a single person, and allegiance cannot be neatly divided -- say on Sundays I'm a Christian, but Monday through Saturday I'm a citizen. Loyalty which is compartmentalized isn't loyalty at all -- it's a work-around for something else. If I told my husband that when I'm at home I'm his wife, but when I'm not at home I'm something else, he could justifiably wonder what I'm trying to pull. I think the same logic applies to our life of faith: if we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, then that is our highest allegiance. That doesn't prevent us from being citizens of this nation or another nation: it should not keep us from voting; it certainly won't exclude us from paying taxes; and there are any number of honorable ways in which we can serve our country as Christians. But it is Jesus Christ who is light to the nations -- not the other way around.

We are privileged to be in a country which allows us to follow the light of Christ without persecution. As you know, there are nations where this is not the case. It's a privilege, but it is also a responsibility. It means there are no easy excuses for avoiding the hard work of behaving like a Christian, and believing in Jesus Christ. This is not separate from our citizenship, it is our identity. Being Christian should dictate who we are, what we do, how we treat other people. Christianity is what sets the course for our life's journey. It should be the light which guides our path, and it should be the light which guides our nation and every nation. Jesus Christ came to us so that people of every nation could be part of the kingdom of God. That is why Matthew places this prophecy at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, after Jesus' baptism and temptation in the wilderness. It's like one of those product warning labels:

CAUTION: Following Jesus could lead to life-changing behavior and even death.

**Do not attempt this gospel without Divine supervision; regular application could be contagious.
If symptoms persist, apply prayer immediately.**

I believe that the best measure -- perhaps the only measure -- of a nation that is under God is how the light of Christ is shining in its citizens. The strength of our economy or our military or our educational system or our health care system is important, but these things are not measures of our faithfulness to Christ. The strength of any community is how we treat one another, especially the poor and the sick and the outcast -- the folks to whom Jesus paid particular attention in his ministry. We might be able to get there with legislation, but only if we begin with compassion.

I am not a politician -- praise God. Some of you may think that a pastor and preacher has no business commenting on our nation or national affairs. But I am a citizen of this country; I love this country, and I care about the direction in which we go. As a Christian, that is inseparable from my commitment to Jesus Christ and my understanding of the kingdom of God. I pray that this nation and every nation would be filled with God's glory and with the light of Christ. Isaiah tells us that when that happens, the people will increase in joy and they will rejoice as at the harvest, and the burdens which have been laid upon their shoulders will be lifted. May it be so. Amen.