

Isaiah 9:1-4
Matthew 4: 12-23
January 23, 2011
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light....” *Wait a minute!*
Haven't we just heard that one? Wasn't it at the Christmas Eve service? What's this passage doing showing up in January?

The reason is that this is the season of Epiphany. The word comes from the Greek and means “manifestation” or “revealing.” This is the season in the Christian spiritual calendar when we celebrate the fact that we are no longer anticipating the coming of the light of Jesus. *It has come!* The key word in Isaiah's proclamation is “*have*” “The people who walked in darkness *have seen* a great light.” It has happened! The wait is over.

Clearly, when Isaiah spoke these words the people attached a very *present tense* meaning to it. Many scholars believe that this confident announcement accompanied the ascending of King Hezekiah to throne of Judah. His assuming the throne was indeed an occasion for tremendous hope for the faithful of Judah who had endured the darkness of corrupt and often God-less rule for many years. For Isaiah and for those who believed in the word of God spoken through him it was the beginning of a new age of righteousness and hope.

Indeed Hezekiah was a faithful and righteous king. However the promised new era did not come. In only a few short years after his death the Babylonians came and destroyed Jerusalem and sent the people into exile.

We Christians need to guard against the temptation to say, “Well *of course* Hezekiah was not the one Isaiah meant. Isaiah was clearly referring to *Jesus!*”

Now before you jump out of your pews and run me out of town, let me explain. I firmly believe that when we for whom Jesus Christ is the Light of the world, the words of Isaiah are a wonderful affirmation of our faith. Yet it is a fundamental understanding of scripture in general and Old Testament scripture in particular that when God speaks it is to address a *current real life historical* circumstance. Yet the same words are also what one might call a word of vision. In other words, while God always speaks to the present reality of space and time, God also and always holds the whole of time and human destiny in view. Thus it is possible for us to recognize and identify with the direct and *this world* impact of Isaiah’s words; yet at the *same time* we can understand these same words as a *foreshadowing* of God’s intention for humanity much later down the line.

Why is this important?

First of all, I believe this approach teaches us humility in approaching scripture. As an aside, let me observe that humility in understanding scripture has been in very short supply for a long time. As Christians we either arrogantly think we know what scripture says and condemn anyone who interprets the Bible differently than we do; *or* we with equal presumption assume that we can never understand the Bible and so never even open the book and look for God within its covers.

True humility means that we trust that the Bible is the word of God. It is the way that God in supreme humility has sought to make himself accessible to our limited hearts and minds. How the Bible came together is an interesting subject to explore and debate. *That* the Bible comes to us in the form it does and contains the stories, history, wisdom,

prophetic speech and teaching that it does *is what we have to receive and accept as God's word to us*. In the Reformed tradition of which we are a part, we understand the Bible is *not God*. It is the primary way God has provided to make himself known. Yet God is beyond all knowing. Therefore any inking we receive about God is just that. Further we believe that God by the Holy Spirit inspired the scriptures to be written, it is also only by that same Holy Spirit that we gain true insight.

Humility then means that we enter into a relationship with scripture in a humble and sincere desire for God to become known to us. Humility means that like the people of old we might get it wrong, but we trust that God forgives errors born of genuine faith. Indeed God is delighted when any of God's children seek him out. We may misinterpret the strict meaning of the words. But if in our hearts we want to seek God we can never fail.

Second, it is now with humility that we can proclaim that in Jesus of Nazareth, the light of God has come. Matthew clearly means the people of his day to understand that Jesus is the light spoken of by Isaiah for he quotes the very verse we just heard. We may well wonder whether Matthew was aware that these words had been attributed to others in the past. I believe deeply that Jesus was very aware that he was seen by some as yet another messianic figure who appeared on the scene, stirred up the people and then disappeared into the mists of history. It may help us to understand the doubt and hostility of the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' day when they hear of this figure drawing crowds around him, challenging generations-old understandings of the Law of Moses and proclaiming a new era of history. To them he was just another deluded trouble maker

who was leading people astray. In their shoes I might ell have had the same point of view.

I say this because when we come to believe that in Jesus the light of God *has come* we should not be surprised when people respond with doubt or even hostility.

Heavens! If we are honest there are days when we are not too sure of Jesus ourselves!

And yet.... And yet when we move away from statements about Jesus that we are told to believe and we listen to the heart we may find a light that comes to lift our spirits. When we think about Jesus: his birth, his life, the way he accepted people—the despised and rejected, the physically, emotionally and spiritually sick, criminals, prostitutes, the lonely, the grieving, the poor, the rich, people with power, people with no power, soldiers and pacifists, women, men, children, doctors, lawyers, shopkeepers and slaves—is there not even a faint stirring of faith that indeed if any human being could claim to be the light of the world, Jesus was? If any human being can be said to be the vessel to hold God's light, to disperse God's light—indeed to be the incandescent glow *of God's light*—can we not claim that no one before or since has so completely born that light into the world?

Third, If you share with me that trembling and vulnerable trust that in Jesus God's light has come and further, that you yearn to grow in that faith and to share it with others, then you may well identify with the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee who were so stirred by the spiritual presence of Jesus that they dropped their nets and followed him. What a powerful moment it must be to be so overwhelmed by the greater vision of the Source of all Life that we let go of all that keeps us from entering fully into that life. And with halting and faltering steps we follow the One who is for light in darkness: the One who leads us to bear his light, his hope to the community around us. Amen.