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Sermon of January 4, 2004 Dr. Jim Standiford, Senior Pastor

“THE SHEER, SHINING JOY”

Jeremiah 31:7-14
John 1:1-18

Lord Jesus Christ, shine your light into our lives so that we might follow you each day of our lives. Amen.

Today is a day of sheer, shining joy: Epiphany Sunday, the day we celebrate the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem, led by the star so they could worship Jesus. Epiphany means to manifest, to make clear, to shine forth. Epiphany Day (which is actually in two more days, January 6, the twelfth day of Christmas) is celebrated because the nature of Jesus— not just as Jewish messiah, but as the Savior of the world—was manifested in the Wise Men, who were non-Jews. They represent us: In their coming to Bethlehem, we are present at his birth; and through their worship, we worship the Christ child. You and I are included in the saving works of Christ.

There are three significant “shining-forths” or manifesting events that take place in the Epiphany season. The first is the light of the star drawing the Wise Men to worship the Christ child. The second is at Jesus’ baptism, the voice of God saying from heaven, “This is my son, with whom I am well pleased.” The third major event takes place at the wedding in Cana, when Jesus performs his first miracle, changing water into wine. These three events manifest who Jesus is: He is for everyone, he is the savior of the world. He is God’s son. And he has the power to give life away to all of us. This is a day of sheer, shining joy, because of those manifestations.

The Old Testament passage selected for today, from Jeremiah, is rich in images. It has two images for God: one as father, and the other as shepherd. The image of God as father, rather than emphasizing his maleness, emphasizes his role as savior and as liberator—first introduced to us in Exodus 4, where God says to pharaoh, “Israel is my son. Let my son go.” In today’s passage, which comes near the end of the exile, the same message holds true once again. God is portrayed as the great liberator: “Let my people go; let them return to their home.” The second image is that of shepherd. In these verses from Jeremiah, you can hear echoes of Psalm 23—God as shepherd, guide, leader. The Jeremiah passage celebrates the character of God as both liberator and leader—one who, after freeing us, goes on to lead us to fullness of life.

The character of God is also emphasized in the returning community that is called forth. Hear the descriptive words in

this passage: those who are blind, the lame, women who are pregnant, the very young, and the very elderly. Some scholars say that in this community one finds everyone except the working men of Israel. It is a community of weakness, a community of need—not a community of strength. How does that point to God? These are the people who are usually excluded by others. God calls *all* together in community—those who are able to work and be constructive, but also all these others, the marginalized people, as well. All are called together with restored relationship with each other, and a restored relationship with God. God manifests the divine self to Jeremiah, in how God liberates and leads, and also in how God calls us to be all together as one community. I received a Christmas card with a poem by Henry Van Dyke, that also speaks of restored relationships.

I am thinking of you today because it is Christmas,
and I wish you happiness.

And tomorrow, because it will be the day after Christmas,
I shall still wish you happiness...
my thoughts and my wishes will be with you always.

Whatever joy comes to you, will make me glad.

All through the year ... I wish you the Spirit of Christmas.

Van Dyke is saying the same thing Jeremiah shares with us. In a restored community, we rejoice in the joy of others. We show forth the Spirit of Christmas, God's presence, when whatever joy comes to another makes us glad. St. Paul said, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." In the restored community, the community of God, all are included, and whenever there is joy for one, there is joy in the whole community. The character of God shines in our lives in these kinds of relationships.

You would think, on the day we celebrate the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem, the New Testament text would be the story of the Wise Men. But this year the lectionary does a little end run on us, giving us the prologue from John's Gospel, shining bright poetry. It draws us back all the way to chapter one of Genesis, because both Genesis and John speak of Word, and life, and light. In Genesis 1, God creates with words: "Let there be light." God speaks and life comes to each created being.

John picks up those three dominant images and repeats them in his introduction to Jesus' life, his Gospel about Jesus. He says that which had been promised in Genesis 1 is coming to fulfillment in the one we know as Jesus of Nazareth—in him is the Word, and life, and light.

In our passage in John 1, the life in Christ which is light for all people has two witnesses, grace and truth. "We have seen his glory [that is, the shining-forth of God, an epiphany], glory as of a father's only son full of grace and truth." We have beheld his epiphany, that of God himself, and it is full of grace and truth.

Jewish custom said there had to be two witnesses to establish the veracity of a given testimony. The presence of grace and truth witness together that Jesus is the light of the world, the Savior, the Son of God. It has been said, truth without grace is cruel, and grace without truth is irresponsible. But when grace and truth come together, the heart of God is made known. The heart of God is present in Jesus—and that is the salvation of the world.

John 1, in its magnificent sheer shining poetry, outlines for us why today is a sheer, shining joyous day—because in Christ all of us are included, all are invited into this community. John's words are not theological speculation about the incarnation, God coming to human life. Rather, John is a witness to the incarnation. He has experienced the sheer shining joy of God's presence in his own life. He gives testimony that he has experienced grace and truth from Christ. We have the testimony of those who have been changed by the incarnation. They have experienced sheer, shining joy.

Biblical writers used contrasting images. In this passage light is the dominant image—but there is also the image of darkness. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it," John says. In the story of Nicodemus, he goes to Jesus in the dark of night, signifying he is in the dark, he does not see the light in Jesus in that

point. Judas goes at night to betray Jesus; he is afraid of the light.

You and I are called to live in the light and to manifest the light, to let it show forth in our lives. We are called to be people of the light, letting the light shine into us and reflect off our skills, abilities, personalities and interests—and reflect out into God’s world. In our life, our everyday human experience, we are called to point to the Word, the truth, the will, the creative power of God.

This a day of sheer, shining joy—because of the light of God we have received in Christ, but also because of the light of God given to wheat fields that produce bread, that becomes broken for us. We give thanks for the light of God, which shines on vines that produce wine that is poured out for us. This is day of sheer shining joy because the light of God always shines when life is given away. It is given this day to you and me.

Poets have played with the images of light and darkness for generations. In 1908 Minnie Louise Haskins, an American lecturer at the London School of Economics, wrote a poem, “The Gate of the Year.” It became a favorite of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. She gave it to her husband, King George VI, and he used in it his 1939 Christmas broadcast, right before the beginning of World War II. The Queen Mother had these words engraved on brass plaques of either side of the doorway to King George’s tomb, and they were read at her own funeral:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year
“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”
And he replied, “Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!”
So I went forth and finding the Hand of God
Trode gladly into the night
He led me towards the hills
And the breaking of day in the lone east.

This is a day of sheer shining joy, because Jesus Christ is the savior of us all. Thanks be to God.

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