

CHRISTMAS DAY 2009

"God's Son shines out with God's glory." That's the title of today's service. I hope you feel it is an appropriate one for Christmas Day. This is the day, after all, when we celebrate the birth of the Christ child—the one about whom the Apostle John said, **"In him was life, and that life was the LIGHT of men"** (John 1:4). God's Son certainly shines—he IS Light!

But what does light do? It dispels, it destroys darkness, doesn't it? So, the Light of Christ illuminates our sin...brings our brokenness to light...exposes us for what we are...calls us to accountability...makes us accept responsibility for our own actions...and destroys our attitude of entitlement, that attitude that selfishly says "I deserve a good life; I deserve happiness; I deserve what I want," when what we truly deserve, what we really are entitled to is eternal torture in hell. When the Christ child grew up and began his public ministry, the first word out of his mouth was a continuation of John the Baptist's message, **"REPENT!"** The Light of Christ exposes our sin even on Christmas Day. We can't hide from it.

The Light of Christ illuminates a better way. It is a way that involves a cross. But it is pure grace. Invited into God's love—a love exposed on the cross as truly, openly, achingly self-sacrificial—we are invited into the LIGHT. We bask in the sunshine, no longer cowering in the darkness of sin...of despair...of uncertainty...of eminent and unavoidable death. The Light of heaven shines on us from beyond death's door. We live in that eternal Light even on this side of the grave. That kind of Light truly brings joy to the world...peace on earth...by filling our individual hearts with inner joy and peace of mind. God's Son certainly shines!

So does God the Father's glory! This is the day, after all, when we celebrate the bright light of God's glory which spilled out upon the hills around Bethlehem. That Light terrified a grungy gang of simple shepherds...and then emboldened them to follow the angel's instructions--to seek out the newborn Light of the World. Our God shines!

"God's Son shines out with God's glory." We know who (and whose) this little baby is, because, like his Dad...he SHINES!

There's a wonderful point of comparison hidden in today's Scripture lessons. Perhaps you missed it: a passing line in the Isaiah reading; hidden between the promise of "Light" shining on a people dwelling in deep darkness and the promise of a Child which is to be born to us...a Son who is to be given to us (both familiar Christmas-season promises)...an obscure little passage flits by. But we don't want to lose it. **"For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor."** Hmm. Odd passage. Doesn't seem to fit, does it? What is this "day of Midian's defeat," after all?

Perhaps a bit of unpacking is necessary. The eyes of any ancient Israelite would have sparkled at the mention of "the day of Midian" and the rich memories such a reference holds. This would be akin to the reaction of a Texan when someone says, "Remember the Alamo," or my own reaction when a veteran tells me, "I stormed the beach at Normandy." "The day of Midian" refers to a tide-turning military victory—the victory Gideon won for God's people in the days when the judges ruled Israel.

Do you remember that story? Gideon, a simple farmer, lived in Israel under the oppression

of the Midianite hordes. The Midianites rode camels in battle—the first army to do so. It would have been as though you were in the infantry and were facing an army of tanks. God called to timid Gideon, made him a general, and sent him off with a tiny platoon to face an army of thousands. In the night, this tiny band sneaked into the camp of the slumbering Midianite soldiers. At a given sign, trumpets were blown, and torches, which had been hidden inside of large clay jars, were exposed. LIGHT in the darkness...and noise...and surprise! The startled Midianite army began hacking itself to bits with its own swords. The camels ran off, trampling their masters on the way. The remaining Midianites retreated to the river, where they were quickly dispatched by Gideon's guerilla warriors. Victory! Total...complete...memorable! All because of a plan that involved an unexpected, tiny, humble victor...and surprising LIGHT, shining at darkest midnight. Our God SHINES!

Do you see where I'm going with this? Where GOD went with this? A parallel is becoming obvious: Gideon is oppressed by an unbeatable foe—the Midianites. Our foes—sin, death and the devil—are even more formidable. God approaches Gideon with a plan that is detailed, well-thought out, surprising, and a bit mysterious. God's plan for salvation is laid from the foundations of the earth, is detailed throughout the Old Testament, is so surprising as to scare several shepherds witless, and is shrouded in mystery. The savior God chooses to conquer Midian is unexpected, insignificant, and humble. The Savior God sends to save humanity is a baby, born to a poor couple and laid in a feedbox for his first hours of sleep.

And most significantly, LIGHT plays a crucial role in both stories. It is light that causes terror...and then unspeakable, joyous victory. OUR GOD SHINES!

"God's Son shines out with God's glory!" That's significant. It identifies this newborn baby as the special One...the holy One...God's own Son, come to earth. Look no further than the flashing glory of God, spilling out on Bethlehem's hillside and you will know that this is a glorious victory, **"as in the day of Midian's defeat."** History is not only repeating itself...it is FULFILLING (filling FULLY) the good and gracious will of our saving God.

That fulfillment keeps happening...keeps repeating...even to today. In YOUR life, Christ comes to shine out with God's glory. He illuminates your sin (which may cause an instant of terror, true). And then he SHINES on you—shines with the light that brings grace, forgiveness, redemption from our God. This tiny, unexpected, humble Baby is already shining on you, right now. Come, this day, to meet him at his manger. You will find him BEAMING with God's love and acceptance.

And then...YOU will shine, bright with the light of God's love. From this place you will go, as the shepherds went from the stable that night, and spread the good news. THEY were beaming Christmas morning as they told what they had heard and seen. A Savior, Christ the Lord has come. He is Light for those who dwell in darkness. He brings the promise of forever light in heaven's glory.

Keep your eyes on him. Like his Father, he is SHINING! Amen.

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