

Hide it under a bushel? No!

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

January 3, 2010

Isaiah 60:1-6

Better days, hoped-for days, had yet to come. But the LORD's prophet spoke to Zion — the LORD's city, the LORD's people — spoke of hope that was a sure thing.

Get up! Give light! Because your light comes, the LORD's glory rises over you. Look, darkness covers the earth, thick clouds the peoples. But the LORD rises over you, his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, kings to your bright rising.

Look all around you. Everyone gathers and comes to you. Your sons come from far away, your daughters are carried on the hip. Then you will see and be radiant, your heart will expand in awe. The sea's roaring will be turned in your favor, nations' resources will come to you. Camels, camels, and more camels will cover you, firstborn animals from Midian and Ephah. Everyone will come from Sheba. They will bring gold and incense, they will make the LORD's praise known.

Children's Story

A while back Sammy the Squirrel, Victor the Vulture, Diane the Deer, and Tina the Turkey started a secret club.

At their first secret meeting, they elected secret club officers: a secret president, a secret vice-president, a secret treasurer, and a secret secretary. They also decided to build a secret clubhouse, where they could hold their secret meetings every week.

It was a really good secret club with really good secret meetings in a really good secret clubhouse. But after three months, there were still only four secret club members, and they couldn't figure out why.

It made no sense to them. Who wouldn't want to join such a great secret club with such great secret meetings in such a great secret clubhouse? That's what Sammy and Victor and Diane and Tina were wondering.

They wondered for a long time, until Diane the Deer finally figured it out. One day she said to others, "How can someone join a club she's never heard of with meetings she doesn't know about in a clubhouse she's never seen?"

That's when Sammy and the others decided to move their secret clubhouse to a place where it was easy to see. And to tell their friends and neighbors about the secret meetings. And to change the secret club to a "not secret" club.

Now there are lots of club members, not just four.

Sermon

Today we mark the Epiphany of our Lord, when Christ is revealed to peoples, to nations, to the world. But how is Christ revealed? How is he made known?

In his gospel, Matthew narrates the story of the magi, wise men who came to Bethlehem, who came to humble themselves before a newborn king, who came to offer him costly gifts. Gold for a king. Incense for a god. And myrrh for a corpse! The coming of the magi caused quite a stir. Herod, in his royal house, was frightened by the news, news of a rival king. All official Jerusalem was frightened along with him at a threatened disruption of the status quo. And no doubt Bethlehem hadn't seen anything like the magi in a long, long time.

But to Bethlehem the magi went, straight to the house where they would find Mary and Jesus. Yet how did they find them? They made no door to door search. They didn't canvas each neighborhood. They didn't go to ask the mayor or the chief rabbi. No. They followed the light. A bright, shining light showed them the way and led them to Jesus. Christ is revealed, Jesus is made known, by the shining of a light. But what is this light?

The light that reveals God is a light that comes from heaven, or a light that shines in the heavens. The magi saw a rising star. When this star took its place in the heavens, they read there its message. The magi were astrologers. For them the night sky overflowed with messages. The long, slow dance of planets and stars both declared and determined the destinies of nations. So God spoke to them in their language, arranging stars or planets or comets to rouse the magi and send them toward Bethlehem. And somehow this “star,” this light in the sky, led the magi to Jesus. Christ is revealed by the shining of a light.

Isaiah the prophet announced another light, not a light in the heavens, but a light from heaven, the light of God’s glory, the light of God’s presence, that would return to Zion.

Darkness had descended over Jerusalem, first the darkness of siege and destruction and exile, then a lingering darkness after the exile’s end. The people had come back to Jerusalem, come back from Babylon, but had God come back with them? In the eyes of the world, Jerusalem was nothing, a place and a people of no account. In her own eyes, Jerusalem was bereft, dressed in rags, smeared with dust. They had gone out with joy and been led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills had burst into song; trees had clapped out a joyful rhythm (cf. Isaiah 55:12). But there was no dancing in Jerusalem in those days, in those dark days.

Into that darkness, the prophet announced the coming of light, light from heaven. *Your light comes*, he said. *The LORD’s glory rises over you. The earth is in darkness*, not Jerusalem. *Peoples are covered by thick clouds*, not you. *No. The LORD rises over you! His glory appears over you!* And everyone, every people and every king, will see you, will take note of you, will honor you, will come and pay tribute to you. And they will praise the LORD, who has shined upon you with his light.

The light from heaven draws people to God, draws them all to God’s people. And so Zion becomes the world’s city: the city where the lights never go out, the city where the gates are never closed, the city that never sleeps. God will do this, the prophet says. God will undo, God will overturn, God will reverse all your expectation and experience, gloomy and haunted as they are, and God will do this!

But the light that reveals God is not just a heavenly light, because God’s people also shine.

Listen to the prophet. First he says, *Get up!* Quit sitting there, inert, immobile, immersed in your unalterable despair. Off your haunches! Up onto your feet! Stand up! Get ready! Lift up your heads! Open your eyes! Stretch your arms out wide!

In other words, Be people of faith! Live and act not according to what you see, but according to what God has promised. *Faith is being sure of what we hope for, certain of what we don’t see* (cf. Hebrews 11:1 NIV). *Faith gives substance to our hopes and convinces us of unseen realities* (cf. Hebrews 11:1 REB). Faith doesn’t just sit there. Faith gets up on its feet.

And faith shines. *Give light!* the prophet says. That’s the second thing out of his mouth. *Give light!* It’s not just God’s light, the light of God’s glory and presence, it’s also God’s people shining with that light, reflecting that light, burning with that light — that’s what draws people to Jerusalem. *Nations will come to your light, kings to your bright rising. You will be radiant*, the prophet says.

And we know this, of course, from the New Testament. Jesus says, *You are the light of the world*. And he says, *Let your light shine before others, and when they see what you do, they will give glory to God*. We all understand this, I think. That for good or for ill, the church is God’s main advertising strategy. We are either a brightly burning, beautiful light, and when people see they come to the light and give glory to God. Or we are smoldering, sputtering, barely lit and giving off a foul smell, and people are repelled and have no good thoughts about God. Or there’s another possibility. We may be a small but lovely flame, with a warm and welcoming glow, yet we hide that light so that no one sees, no one knows, and God is neither damned nor praised because of us.

Which brings us, at last, to today’s question: What about our light? This is not just an abstract question. More than once lately I’ve heard people at Olentangy Church wondering out loud (perhaps you’ve wondered about it quietly yourself), “Why don’t more people come to be a part of this church?” Usually the

question is accompanied by expressions of appreciation and gratitude. Appreciation for the good things about Olentangy Church: the genuine faith and commitment of the members, the warmth of our fellowship, the biblical perspective and reformational worldview found here. And also gratitude to God for every good thing about the church. Not that we imagine we're the best church in town (or the only church). We recognize the hand of God blessing and guiding our sisters and brothers all over Columbus. But we also recognize that God has given us a unique story, valuable resources, and a particular place in the city. Recognizing and appreciating all this, and more, we wonder: "Why don't more people come to be a part of this church?" And lately we've started to wonder about that question with some urgency, because we haven't even been replenishing, never mind increasing, our numbers. So, what about our light?

Let me first mention some positive things. Our light shines as we participate in the BREAD organization, acting together with others for community justice. Our light shines as we participate in the work of Neighborhood Services, giving money and time to assist the working poor. Our light shines as we participate in the work of Habitat for Humanity, helping disadvantaged people gain one important advantage at least. Our light shines as we help an elderly neighbor with her yard work. Our light shines as we tutor an at-risk child after school. Our light shines as we visit men in prison. And there's more, of course.

But some things are missing. Some things aren't quite right.

In his letter, James writes, "You don't have because you don't ask" (James 4:2). Could it be that people don't come to be a part of this church because we're not asking God to make that happen? Because we've given up on the idea? Because we can't imagine ourselves in Isaiah's picture, with people streaming to us, to the beauty of the light of Christ in us? And could it be that people don't come to be a part of this church because we're not asking them? Because we're not telling people the story of Olentangy Church and of God's presence and blessing — God is not just with the church in general, but with local churches in particular places, and not just with the big ones; we too have the Spirit! Do people not come because we're not telling them the story of Olentangy Church and inviting them to be a part of it?

Paul says, in his letter to the Romans, that people can't believe without hearing and they can't hear without someone telling them (cf. Romans 10:14). In a similar way, people can't come unless they've been asked, can they? Well, they could come without being asked. But first they would have to know that we're here. And this is something that really has me wondering.

A most common way for people to know about a church is to see its building. For better or worse, a church building is often the most visible sign of a church's presence in a community. We have been blessed, by God's providence and by the decisions of long ago members, with a very visible location. What could be better than frontage along Olentangy River Road just north of the hospital? Yet for some reason, we seem to be practically invisible.

I keep hearing stories about that. On Christmas day, Jan met a woman who lives nearby. She had no idea that our church building is here. Recently a little girl started at the child care center. Her mother found out about the center in a roundabout way. Even though she has worked next door at Whetstone for ten years, she had no idea there was a church building here and a child care center. And some months ago, Ed E. met with a community leader. She knew every building along this stretch of Olentangy River Road on both sides. But she did not know there was a church building here.

I get the feeling that one bright light of ours, the one that could be most visible, the light of our existence, of our presence here in north Columbus — I get the feeling that that light is hidden. How else do we explain it, when people don't know we're here?

Now, we didn't decide to hide on purpose. Over the years it just happened. We didn't even notice. And now we can hardly believe it. And we don't want to believe it. We know our church building is here. We can see it. Yes, we can see it. Yes, we know it's here. But to the world driving by — how many hundred of cars go by here every day? — to the world driving by, we are invisible.

I've been warned to steer clear of the subject, not to mention it. And generally I've heeded that warning, not wanting to touch the third rail. But it's the trees, isn't it? All those large, beautiful trees out front. Because of those trees, we're hidden, nearly invisible. Get in your car and drive by, especially in the summer,

but even now. Pretend, if you can, that you don't know this building is here, and you probably won't even notice it. That's what people are telling us, that we're hidden.

I know, many of us love trees, and we love those trees. But the church is not in the business of trees. We are called to shine, to shine with the light of Christ, to shine with the light of Christ for people to see. We are not to hide, nor are we to look like we're hiding.

My fear is that nestling here, hidden or nearly hidden behind the trees, we're sending a message, a message to people who finally notice that we're here, an unintentional message, but a message nonetheless. Behind the trees we're saying, whether we want to or not, "We don't want you, we don't need you, or this community. We're content and sufficient by ourselves." There's no light shining from that kind of message.

I was sweating in fear preparing this sermon, this part of it. It scares me. It really does. I had a bad experience in my last church, and I don't want anything like that to happen again. So I can be a chicken. But I can't escape this conviction, a conviction I've tried to avoid, yet a conviction that keeps getting reinforced by the stories I hear, a conviction that it's past time for us to do something about those trees, past time to take that bushel away, to let the city see and know that we're here.

Olentangy Church is a living church of Jesus Christ. The light of Christ is upon us. We can get up and give light. We have nothing to hide. We are more than ready to be seen. And we have a story to tell.

Do we dare believe that people will hear us and see us and come and join with us to give glory to God? Do we dare?

Faith dares. Faith believes. Faith acts. Even when the only thing we have to go on is our hope and our prayers. May God grant us that kind of faith!