

## **The Challenge of Revealing Light**

Malachi 3:1-4

Hebrews 2:14-18

Luke 2:22-40

Psalm 24:7-10

Were any of you able to enjoy viewing the planetary alignment in the night's sky this winter? In case you didn't know, for most of January: Venus, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Uranus and Neptune have been visible at the same time, lined up spreading through the center of the heavens. One of the things I think is most interesting about astronomy is that the stars and planets are always there. Our inability to see them based on our location, tools, and timing does not change the reality that they are up there, right now.

The mystery of knowing and believing the stars and planets exist in the sky, even during the daytime when they cannot be seen, is a similar mystery of faith to Simeon's words when Jesus is presented in the temple. He is holding an infant while praising God for the gift of seeing the world's salvation. Jesus was a baby. He was no one's savior. In fact, he needed saving. If it wasn't for the care and attention of his parents, he would be the one desperate for salvation. And yet, Simeon sees past the frame of this helpless child into the miraculous reality that existed beyond human sight.

We are in the middle of the season of epiphany. Epiphany is all about the manifestation of Jesus in the world. It's about the surprising ways and unexpected places that Jesus appeared and was made known to a world that wanted Salvation but was expecting it to come in a different form. Simeon's song outlines the epiphany for us by saying he would be a "light for revelation to the gentiles", a "sign" and that through Jesus, inner thoughts would be revealed. Everything about Jesus was a literal revelation. It was an uncovering of what had previously been hidden, making known what had not been understood. As

Christians, we are tasked with taking up this work that Jesus started. In a dark world, the light of God's loving presence will always be an epiphany.

Before Jesus came, the entirety of the Old Testament, explained the love of God for the world but given to a single group of people, the Israelites. They understood, through these same Scriptures, that God would send them a rescuer, someone to save them from their oppression, liberate, and provide vindication for them. But they understood that it was for them alone. That was what their religion had taught them and so they upheld their religious understanding through separating from the world, as the religious faithful, they were positioned against everyone else. Anyone ritually impure from disease or poverty had to be isolated away. Anyone who did not share Jewish blood was equally alien and separate from the goodness they understood God had reserved for them. They did not expect their Savior, their Messiah, to include those their religion excluded. Which is why Simeon warned that Jesus would be opposed.

All these years later, friends, we Christians are at just as much risk of missing this miraculous epiphany. We, like the middle-class Jewish believers who attend regular services, give alms to the poor, and recite our prayers, we too risk missing the shocking reality of God's epiphany in Christ. God's glory prepared "in the presence of all peoples" through Christ was and still is shattering to every world's system.

We love being Americans. We are so grateful to have been born in and raised in this country. This is an amazing nation! These Israelites loved their land too. Their Scriptures testified to its sacredness, It was their inheritance from God, and protected. Even so, Luke wrote this story after their nation had once again been ransacked by the enemy. By the time these words were penned, the temple where this scene takes place had been leveled. The revelation of God is that, in Christ, our salvation transcends the boundary

lines that all national, political, and social systems create. Christ is our king and the salvation he offers does not adhere to human dividing lines. God's love is for everyone, even the Romans who destroyed Jerusalem and the temple where God's glory rested. We all like being Christian when we're sitting in our churches. It gets harder when we walk outside and have to navigate complex relationships during challenging times. The first century Jews struggled to hear Jesus' message because they were so attached to their religious and national identity. It makes me wonder what part of Jesus message we can't hear because of our own attachments. Today's texts talk about the difficulty of experiencing testing and refining. Malachi compares the Lord to refiner's fire and launderer's soap. These images can appear menacing, but both pictures indicate something of beauty being uncovered. God prizes the value of every soul. While being scrubbed clean can chafe and dross being melted off silver can burn, the brilliance and purity of what exists within us wants to be exposed. We all want to be seen for who we really are. While no one desires pain, even Jesus endured the suffering of testing and now tenderly cares for us when we walk through fires of our own.

One of the trickiest parts of being Christian is determining what Jesus' message of salvation means for us. If it is merely a balm for us as individuals who trust God and enjoy a private prayer life, but it does nothing to actively touch the lives of others, then it may not be the message of Jesus. If our Christianity only serves to congratulate ourselves for our correct beliefs and religious observances, without being good news for those outside of our worshiping communities, then it isn't the revelation Simeon was heralding in Jesus.

Today's message is one of celebration. Jesus, the greatest gift the world has ever know, the light, has been made manifest. And we too are called the lights of the world. We get to participate in the work Jesus started. So, while this day is celebratory, it also invites some legitimate introspection.

Because of the way the human brain works, we are all biased. We can't help it. It doesn't mean we are evil; it means all humans feel comfortable and drawn towards certain people, places, and things while being less comfortable and more repelled by others. It's a fact, not a judgment. The author of Hebrews says that we are all flesh and blood, but one of the challenging realities of being human is that we don't always recognize our common humanity. Our work is discerning and naming where our natural boundaries exist. To the people of Jesus' world, the gentiles and the ritually impure were the ones they couldn't imagine God would embrace. So, who is it for us? We all have people in our lives we prefer to avoid. We all have people whose lives, choices, beliefs or practices we find repellant. We also all have people we fail to see entirely. Recognizing who those people are does not mean we are wicked. But it does provide for us an opportunity.

The author of Hebrews tells us Jesus' love compelled him to leave his powerful, safe position in Heaven to "become like his brothers and sisters". On earth, Jesus associated with the lowly, the outcasts, and the undesirables, elevating them through his ability to see past their grimy exteriors. Simeon prophesied that Jesus was destined for the "rising and falling of many". If God's love in Jesus came to earth to lift the lowly and let the powerful fall, are we willing to reevaluate our judgments regarding the limitations of God's love? Are we willing to see and love all people, even the ones we find offensive?

Every one of us, every human on the planet, has some crusty grime that needs scrubbing off, some dross that needs purging. Admitting it and allowing God to begin the work of uncovering the beauty underneath will make us shine brighter, it will allow us to be better at participating in the work of unveiling God's glory to others. Also, admitting our own imperfections will likely position us to be humbler and kinder towards those we struggle to love. Are we willing?

May we be a people whose light shines so brightly that we, like Simeon, may end our days in peace knowing that we have lived to reveal the good news of God in Christ to all people, beyond every boundary line.