

Epiphany 2008

Duke Chapel

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

PIERCED BY LIGHT

by Ellen Davis

The seasons of the church year are the seasons of the Christian life—that is, moments of God’s life made manifest through Jesus Christ—and so they are the seasons of every human life, as it is illumined by the gospel. In the twelve days of Christmas we celebrate God’s drawing near to us in the way we least expect. In the forty days of Lent we grieve God’s loneliness, due to our sin. In the seven weeks of Easter we rejoice in the triumph of life—God’s life—over death. During these several seasons we speak of celebration, grieving, rejoicing, but that does not mean that observing them is in the first instance a matter of summoning the right emotions for each. I (or you) may not have *felt* especially close to God these past twelve days of Christmas, and often during Lent there are good reasons to feel deeply glad. Easter joy is a mystical reality made possible by faith; yet the equally real grief and suffering that now afflict some (or many) of us, will not magically evaporate on Easter morning. So the Christian walk takes us through the church’s seasons year by year, whether we feel them or not. Sometimes we crawl through them, emotionally speaking. But still we go through them, because that is how we gradually learn to “put on Christ,” as the Apostle Paul said (Gal. 3:27, cf. Rom. 13:14). The seasons of the church year help us to experience the truth of the gospel in all the different moments and circumstances and moods of our lives.

We come today to one of the chief days of the year; in many Christian communities, from ancient times to the present, January 6 is a more important day than December 25, though not for most American Christians. “What is Epiphany?” one of my students asked me a few years ago, in an emergency telephone call from Sudan. The theological college where she had gone to teach was cancelling classes to celebrate a church holiday of which she had never heard. This is what I *wish* I had said in response to Megan’s telephone call:

Epiphany is a burst of light coming out of darkness, like Peggy Parker’s image of the first day of creation on the front of your bulletin. Epiphany is a flash of wild hope in God, when there is plenty of reason for despair. The prophet Isaiah gives us the clue to this season when he announces:

Look, darkness covers the earth,  
and thick darkness the nations.  
Yet over you the LORD dawns,  
and his glory can be seen over you.  
Peoples, gentiles will come to your light....  
Lift up your eyes and look around.... (Isaiah 60:2-4a)

The most important thing to notice here is what Isaiah does *not* say, here or anywhere else. He does not say that when God’s light comes, the darkness simply goes away. No biblical writer ever says that. What Isaiah does say is that against the thick darkness, a point of light “can be seen” (v. 2), and that is what he calls “God’s glory.” It becomes visible, at least to some—and we could be among them. Listen again to what the prophet is saying to God’s people: “Darkness covers the earth; everyone is enshrouded in it. Yet God’s light is breaking through, just over your

head. Lift up your eyes and look around: from every direction folks are streaming toward you. They are drawn to the breaking light *they* can see around you, that they have been straining to see; everywhere people are so weary of sitting in darkness.”<sup>1</sup>

These words were first spoken to the people Israel in a very dark time in their political history. About sixty years before this prophetic moment, the Babylonian army had laid siege to the holy city of Jerusalem and destroyed it: torn down the temple, put out the eyes of the king, and packed off the people into exile—a forced march, three months across the top of the Syrian desert to Babylon. But the wheel of history turned quickly, and about 50 years later the mighty Babylonian Empire itself crashed and burned. Now the even more powerful Persian Empire took control of its conquered territories. “The Great King” of Persia let some Israelites return to Jerusalem, but they were still vassals, in a real sense exiles in their own land. This is the dark situation in which the prophet known as exilic Isaiah is called to speak for God.

Christians have traditionally called Isaiah the “evangelical prophet”; this book gives us indispensable insight into what God is doing in Jesus Christ. And of all its insights into God’s “strange doings” (Isa. 28:21), as Isaiah calls them, this is the most essential: God’s light becomes clearly visible in the world precisely in the place where people are suffering in faith.

Wherever someone has given up depending on her own resources and is counting wholly on God;

Wherever people no longer bother with polite piety and tell it “as it is” to God;

Wherever we dare to call on God to act *now* on our behalf: “If only you would tear open the heavens and come down...!” (Isa. 63:19);

Wherever we are waiting in anguished hope for God to *do* something—

at that point there is (you might say) a thin place in the darkness, and that is likely to be the place where God’s light breaks through, where Epiphany happens. This is the truth that the church probes and tests in this season: the prophetic insight that God’s light is perceived most clearly by those who know the territory of darkness like the back of their hand.

From the beginning the church has put Isaiah’s insight to the test under the pressure of history—that is, under the intense pressure of very real suffering. Is it true, we ask, in this dark place, that God’s light in Jesus Christ is visible? The evangelist Matthew asked that question on behalf of the people Israel in another situation of vassalage, in Roman Palestine in the Year 1 of the Christian calendar, and this story is his answer: During the horrific reign of King Herod, starwatchers came from the East (we call them *magi*). Probably they came from Mesopotamia, the ancestral home of astrologers. They had departed from the ancient cradle of civilization and empires, traveled hundreds of miles to the dusty little burg of Bethlehem in the occupied territory of Judea—all because they had seen one special light in the heavens that spoke to them of God’s burning hope for the world. Just as Isaiah had said, “Gentiles will come to your light.” “Where is the one born king of the Jews?” they asked. “For we have seen his star at its rising, and we have come to worship him” (Matt. 2:2). They came to a kingdom enveloped by darkness, ruled by a brutal tyrant to whom any life but his own was worth little, and Jewish lives were worth nothing at all. Those *magi* followed the star until it stopped, over one nondescript Jewish house (Matthew envisions them coming to a house, not a stable)—doubtless a cramped house in a poor district of that little town patrolled by the Roman occupation force. And then, Matthew tells us, the *magi* “were wildly happy; they were overwhelmed with joy” (2:10). Go figure. What did astrologers

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Isa. 9:2.

from the East know about the meaning of that star, or that Jewish baby? Surely these *goyim* knew next to nothing about the God of Israel, far less than we know about the life of God as it is manifested in Jesus Christ. But remember, they were stargazers. They had trained their eyes to look up into the night sky, to pay attention always to what far exceeded their own understanding and imagination. What better preparation could there be for seeing the light that God shines into our darkest night, for discerning the thin shafts that make life possible in the midst of so much suffering and death?

So Matthew supports Isaiah's claim that the darkness itself makes God's light visible to eyes that are searching for it. He gives us the crucial piece of evidence from the dawn of Christian time: God's light once pierced the darkness of Roman Palestine, and that light has never been wholly swallowed by the darkness. That helps us identify other pieces of confirming evidence from our own time and place. Here is one from New York City, just a few years ago, offered by my friend Barbara. It was Christmas Eve, and her husband of more than thirty years was then in the last few weeks of his intense struggle with pancreatic cancer. "It's so strange," she said; "even in the midst of *this*, I am stunned at moments by a flash of joy, always over some tiny thing. Yesterday it was the smell of the gingerbread we toasted for breakfast. And when I admitted that to Bob, he said, 'Yes, this is a time of fulfillment.'" That is Epiphany: a shaft of light piercing the darkness. The darkness did not go away for Barbara and Bob; indeed their darkness became deeper for a time, as they walked through the valley of death's dark shadow. Nonetheless, because death's darkness had been pierced by God's "marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9), its tyranny was broken. Death lost its "sting" (1 Cor. 15:55. cf. Hos. 13:14), its capacity to dehumanize, to strip us of our history and our gratitude, leaving nothing but sheer terror.

In our time, the suffering church in Africa offers some of the strongest evidence that those who know the darkness may know also the piercing presence of God. That is why this Chapel is active in seeking out friendship and partnership with our sisters and brothers in Southern Sudan. A year ago you began sponsoring the formal theological education of two young priests, Daniel Juach Deng and Mark Diing Kuany. They and their fellow students at Renk Theological College were once what we call "lost boys." They lost much or most of their family in the genocidal war that raged for over twenty years in Southern Sudan, killing more than two million. Mark, Daniel, and the most of their agemates grew up as refugees, many of them fleeing from Sudan to Ethiopia, back to Sudan and then on to refugee camps (whole refugee cities really), such as Kakuma in Kenya. In those years of intense persecution and death, the church grew exponentially among the Sudanese, because they heard God speaking to them through the gospel of our suffering Lord. The gospel gave them a way to make sense of their suffering; more than that, it gave them "Emmanuel," a God to be *with them* in their suffering.

The Government's attacks on the Southern Sudanese have now abated, thank God, at least for the present, but for our friends the suffering that comes from poverty has not ended. In July of this past year, Mark Diing's young child died—probably of water-borne disease, the biggest killer of all in Sudan. I met Mark a few weeks later, as soon as he could make the long journey—several hundred miles down the Nile—back from his home village to the Theological College. Sadly I was not surprised by his story; stories like his are all too common in Sudan. What arrested my attention as we studied Scripture together over the next two weeks was the light shining steadily from his face. This young priest was then only six months into his formal theological education, yet already he knew something no curriculum or professor of theology can impart; and it is the one thing on which the church stands or falls. This young bereaved father

“know[s] Christ and the power of his resurrection” (Phil. 3:10). He knows what the exilic prophet Isaiah and the Evangelists proclaimed, that the tyranny of death has been broken forever, pierced by the marvelous light of God in Christ. And yes, Mark Diing knows too the sharing in Christ’s sufferings, that strange sharing of which the Apostle Paul speaks so often, in words we can scarcely understand even as we cling to them; he knows the sharing in Christ’s suffering that confirms for those who believe the reality of God’s costly triumph over death.<sup>2</sup>

We at this Chapel are privileged to assist in a small way as Mark Diing, Daniel Juach, and their fellow students deepen their book-learning about Scripture and the Christian tradition. But the Sudanis have something much more valuable to impart to us: they show us what it is to live by the light of Christ. In the church’s traditional language, they show us “the state of the blessed,” and that is not so much a settled condition as it is a choice. The state of the blessed is a decision, constantly renewed, to orient ourselves toward the shafts of God’s light that pierce our darkness. We remember our friends in Sudan today, as we enter into this season of Epiphany, because they, like the *magi*, witness to us that the choice to look for the light and follow it is always before us: “We have seen his star at its rising, and we have come to worship him.”

The gospel truth to which the Sudanese church witnesses so powerfully in this generation is that the state of the blessed has nothing at all to do with happy life circumstances. Nor is it an accident of temperament, as though only people with sunny natures could feel the blessings of God. Rather, the state of blessedness belongs to those who have trained their eyes to look always for God’s marvelous light overcoming the darkness that threatens us from any and every side, overcoming also the darkness that wells up from within us.

God’s light becomes visible to those who seek it, but our seeking is only part of the truth of Epiphany, and it is the smaller part. The greater truth is about God’s seeking and finding us. Anyone whose darkness has been pierced will tell you that when they finally saw God’s light, they experienced it not as their own discovery, but as a surprising gift. Like every other season of the church year, Epiphany tells a story that is more about God than about us. It is a story about the wild hope, the wonderful inventiveness of the gracious Lover of souls. Epiphany is about God’s searching in the dark for Israel and every other people on earth, us included, determined to draw us forth into the marvelous light of Christ. May we see it with our eyes, in our time, O Lord. Amen.

Ellen F. Davis

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<sup>2</sup> See Phil 3:10, Eph. 3:13, etc.