

January 6, 2008  
The Epiphany of Our Lord

“Standing on the Inside”

Isaiah 60:1-6

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you.  
And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your rising.  
Lift up your eyes all around, and see;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from afar,  
and your daughters shall be carried on the hip.  
Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and exult,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.*

Sermon

I'm sure we've all felt it at one time or another to some degree. I'm talking about being the "outsider." It happens a lot in when one is dating. A boy or girl you've started seeing asks you to a family function (weddings are notorious for this) and you find yourself surrounded by all these folks who know each other and are perfectly comfortable there. But you kind of feel set apart because it's not your family. You don't get some of the jokes and references. You're the "outsider."

I've heard quite a few references to a "good ole boy" network at work behind the scenes in south Louisiana culture. I'm not sure if it's true or not, but there seems to be a perception that folks whose family roots go deep in this region enjoy a type of ambiguous membership in some type of Cajun club, entitling them to a great degree of acceptance among their Cajun peers which "outsiders" from elsewhere in the country don't receive.

You even can get this feeling visiting other churches. I'm sure most of us could relate a time we visited a church and one of two things happened; we were ignored because we were an "outsider," or we were overwhelmed with kindness because we were the "outsider." Either way, we didn't feel we were part of the group. We felt as if we stood apart, out on the fringe somewhere.

The Bible is full of outsiders. Start with the Garden. Adam and Eve sin and where do they have to go? Outside. Jump to the story of Noah and his family. Eight people are on the

inside, the whole rest of the world are outsiders killed in the flood. Then God comes to Abraham and begins building this special nation Israel. God focuses His favor on this one nation and every other people on earth seem to be outside of God's goodwill. And even Israel itself manages to reject God so much that they too end up on the outside. First Assyria takes the northern ten tribes outside of the promised land, then Babylon takes what's left. Eventually Israel is left seemingly outside of God's blessing, a remnant of their former glory living under the rule of the Roman Empire.

But with Christ everything changes. Suddenly, all the people who were outside, in the darkness so to speak, are invited inside, into the light. 700 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah told Israel how Christ's work would invite all people, not just the Jews, to come back into the favor of Yahweh. *"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."*

The invitation to come inside Christ's light reaches well beyond Israel. The light of the star invited the wise men from afar to take part in welcoming the young Jesus into the world as a king. These men were not Jews. They were the nations that "shall come to your light." The wise men were far outside of Israel, geographically, culturally, racially, even spiritually. But they were invited to discover Jesus Christ as king and savior.

And we 2000 years later have received this invitation much more clearly. We know that Christ suffered and died to pay for the sin that kept us on the outside, separated from our holy God. We know that the holy land Christ won for us by His resurrection is more than just a plot at the east end of the Mediterranean Sea. We know Christ has won us a place inside the new heaven and new earth in eternity. We know that through faith in Christ we have joined into Christ. We're part of His body on earth, the church. In Holy Baptism the Holy Spirit ushers us from the outside, the darkness, to the inside, the light. We've crossed from death to life. We are on the inside.

But we don't always believe it...or at least part of us resists it. We read our Bibles and are told of forgiveness. We come to church and hear the words, "Your sins are forgiven." We proclaim our salvation with hymns and prayers. We do all these things telling ourselves over and over that we stand on the inside of God's favor, in His light. Yet there is always this voice, this doubt, at the edge of our mind telling us that no, we can't be on the inside. We look at the sin in our lives. We have these terrible thoughts and angers and rages inside ourselves. We see this darkness in ourselves and we wonder if we really are on the inside. Are we standing in the light?

Sometimes we may even feel somewhat like Herod. The truth of Christ is made plain to us, but a part of us feels embracing our savior might cost us something. A part of us wants to get rid of the demands faith puts on us so we can enjoy our greed or our lust or our pride or whatever. A part of us is always trying to say that the outside is better. The darkness is freer.

And Satan is more than happy to condemn you for these feelings. That sly fox is ever screaming in our ear, "Look at you! People on the inside of Christ don't think like that. Those standing in the light don't do things like that! Feel those desires you have? You are SO on the outside."

We listen, and then it's not too difficult to begin to see ourselves standing on the fringes of the light. We can start thinking we are indeed on the outside, in the darkness. We see our sinful thoughts and deeds and begin to despair, because how can such a wretched, disobedient, perverted person possibly be one of Christ's chosen insiders?

(Pause)

Remember who's in charge of this salvation thing here. Scripture does not say, "And the Lord will choose you and then you had better shine with some glory or you're toast." No, what Scripture says is, "*but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.*" We have to remember that being saved from our sins, being brought in from the outside, is not something we do for ourselves. It is something that is done to us. The Lord Jesus Christ does the work of salvation and gives it to us. The Lord Jesus Christ pays the cost to move us from the outside darkness to the inside light. We are on the inside of Christ's salvation because Christ made it so, not because we've been good enough to stay there.

We stand inside the light of the Gospel. Gospel means "good tidings" and what are those good tidings? The news that your God has done for you what you were unable to do. He has made you light by shining His light upon you. He daily returns you to your baptism and washes the sin from you and moves you from the outside condemnation to the inside blessings. He defeats the death that wants to stick to you and covers you in life eternal.

You are on the inside; the inside of Christ's church. Satan wants you to look at your sin and tell yourself that there is no way you are here, inside Christ's body. But Christ instituted His church for this very reason; that He could continue shining the light of His forgiveness on us, washing away the sins of those inside that they may shine His light out into the world. Christ has made His church the new Israel. And we are members, insiders, because Christ has made us so.

This is our struggle in faith. To realize and trust that we are the people Christ has made us. To understand that we are no longer a sinful people in the darkness struggling to claw our way into the light. We have arrived. We are on the inside. We are reflecting Christ's light. We are the Israel that is a shining light in the darkness. We are the Israel to which the nations are coming in search of salvation. We have the unsearchable riches of Christ given to us as a possession. We have salvation. We are saved. The nations, the outsiders, they are looking to us, the insiders, because we have the wonderful Gospel gift that continues to be given and given and given.

Wake up every morning and remind yourself, "I am Christ's. I am baptized. I am forgive. I am holy. I am inside of Christ's light."

(Pray)

Father in heaven, help us to shine with Your light each and every day. Amen