

Rev. Shaun Arndt
Sunday, January 5, 2024
Acts 13:46-49

May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. Amen.

From Bethlehem to the End of the Earth

Dear Friends in Christ,

700 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah, by the Holy Spirit spoke about the bright light that would destroy the **deep darkness** of sin's sorrow and scatter **the shadow of death**. He connected this saving light to the birth of a child, **a son** from David's family who would also be the **Mighty God**.

The prophet later added that though this great Savior would come from the Jewish people, He would be the saving light for all people. Isaiah 49 says: **I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth** (Is 48:6).

By the way, do not let it trouble you the verse is quoted like this by Paul in our lesson from the New Testament book of Acts: **a light for the Gentiles**.

Gentiles is just an old traditional Latin based word for nations, meaning the other nations besides the Jews, nations who in Old Testament times did not worship the true God and were steeped in unbelief. The Old Testament Hebrew word for this is *Goi-im* –again meaning 'nations' and the Greek New Testament word is *Ethnay* – again meaning nations. So, most places in the Bible when you see **Gentiles** you can also translate nations and when you see nations you could also translate **Gentiles**.

Now this **light for the Gentiles** we are talking about is of course, our Lord Jesus Christ who said: **I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life** (Jn 8:12).

This morning, we rejoice and live in the good news that the light of Christ shines *From Bethlehem to the End of the Earth*.

Now, whenever God says something will happen, it happens. And so, on Christmas we celebrated how Jesus, **the light and life of all mankind**, was born in Bethlehem just as foretold.

But immediately, the devil tried to stop this light. Last week we heard about the flight to Egypt and Herod's attempt to murder the newborn Savior. That would not be the last time Satan would try to stop Christ using attack and temptation.

And then there came the day it seemed the light had failed. The sky grew dark as **the Light of the World** hung on a cross, overshadowed by all this world's sin, injustice, guilt, shame and evil and above all the wrath of God unleashed upon His sinless soul.

But as our God loves to do, He flipped things on their head. He turned what looks like darkness into light and what looks like defeat into victory! Easter morning dawned to show that Christ has risen and conquered the **shadow of death**. That means Jesus' death was not defeat, but the life of the world. The darkness of the cross has become the light of sins forgiven in full and proof that God's face shines with grace.

Once more, Jesus made it clear that He was "**light for the Gentiles.... and... salvation to the end of the earth**" as He gave His Church its mission: **Go and gather disciples from all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to keep all the instructions I have given you.** (Mt 28:20).

As soon as the bright light of Jesus' saving message went out, Satan again tried to swallow it up with darkness. One man especially led the charge to snuff out the message of Jesus attacking the early Christian Church.

But once again the Lord had the victory. Jesus simply used the persecutions to scatter His Church to new lands where they could shine the bright light of His saving Word. And the man who had led the persecution, the Lord completely changed his heart with a blinding light on the road to Damascus and the water and promise Word of Holy Baptism.

That man's name? Saul, better known as Paul! And so, the light of Christ changed a persecutor who wanted to extinguish the message of Christ into an Apostle and missionary working to carry the light of Christ **From Bethlehem to the End of the Earth**.

And that's how **Paul** and his fellow missionary **Barnabas** ended up in the town of Psidian Antioch, in the mountains of central Turkey, then called Galatia, a region settled mostly by Celts and Greeks.

As he often did on his missionary journeys, Paul started speaking about Jesus to the Jewish population in the town, since they already knew the promises of Christ from Old Testament. And so Paul preached an amazing sermon to the Synagogue that you can read in Acts 13. He said, **Through this Jesus forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you, also forgiveness from everything from which you could not be justified through the law of Moses** (38).

Human effort of every kind only leaves us in doubt and death. But Christ has done what we never could. Jesus sets us right with God. He has given us life everlasting. He will turn the darkness of death into the light of eternal life!

A week later Paul was back in the synagogue, and in the meantime the **Gentiles** Greeks and Celts who had converted to the Jewish faith told their friends and neighbors so that Acts tell us: **almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of God.**

Instead of rejoicing at this sight, the Bible tells us many of the Jews became **jealous**. Sinful pride made them think salvation had something to do with who they were and the things they did. “This grace can’t really be so free that it could be for anyone – especially not those pagan **Gentiles** who have different customs and political ideas than us!”

So the Apostles had to confront this unbelief: **Since you reject (God’s Word) and consider yourselves unworthy of eternal life, look: We are now turning to the Gentiles!**

But their unbelief would not stop God’s plan to bring His Word to still more people. God’s grace really is free and really is for all people, just as Isaiah had wrote: **I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the end of the earth.”**

And again, when God says something will happen, it happens: **When the Gentiles heard this, they were rejoicing and praising the word of the Lord. All who had been appointed for eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being carried through the whole region.**

Now I am aware I just spent most of this sermon telling you the story of how the light of God’s saving promises in Jesus went **From Bethlehem to the End of the Earth** – that is to the **Gentiles** in Galatia. There’s a reason for that.

Just think all God did, all He ruled, all that He promised and accomplished and carried out to bring the light of His promises of Jesus to these people in distant Galatia – both those who by their own fault it **rejected God’s Word** and those who **believed** because the Lord **had appointed** them **for eternal life**. Just think all God did to bring the light of Christ **From Bethlehem** to them!

Do you see where this is all going? Let me give you the Old Testament Bible name for Wisconsin and Sun Prairie –it’s all one phrase. Here it is: **The end of the earth**. To Old Testament Israelites, the most far off distant places on the other side of the world is called **The end of the earth**.

So when Isaiah wrote it in 700 BC and Paul quoted it in our lesson, the Lord was talking about you and me when He said that Jesus is **a light for the Gentiles... to the end of the earth.”**

Just think all God did and ruled to bring the saving light of Jesus' work **From Bethlehem to you and me!** That takes us down through almost 2,000 more years of history where God preserved His Word and brought it across the world through countless missionaries, pastors, teachers, grandmas, grandpas, moms, dads, neighbors, co-workers.

Marvel at how God ruled the rise and fall of nations, migrations and immigrations, all so that the bright light of forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus would shine on your heart in the water and word of baptism or as you sat on a loved one's lap as a child learning songs about Jesus or as an adult you finally heard clearly that His grace really is free, you are loved by the Lord!

Not only did God send His Son to save you, but He chose you and ruled all history to bring that message to you and bring you to believe it! We cannot earn it in the least. It is a gift from God and has nothing to do with our race or status or works.

And so there's no room for pride. Not when the Bible makes it clear how our natural hearts could so easily push Christ away like the Jews in our lesson. There is no room for pride since the only reason we do believe is because God **appointed us for eternal life.**

We do nothing to earn God's gifts in Christ. But that does not mean we now do nothing. Not when His grace has shown upon us and changed us every bit as much as it did Paul!

Since the light of Jesus' love has shown on us all the way **From Bethlehem to the End of the Earth,** let us first of all simply receive this gift with humble thanks and praise!

Then let us repent of and watch out for any way in which we might **reject** the message of God's Word and forfeit eternal life, but instead with God's help, let us hear, read, learn and cling to the message of the Bible.

Finally, let us remember that Jesus is still **light for the Gentiles...** to **bring salvation to the end of the earth.** And that means to Sun Prairie – to our homes and family, to our neighbors and co-workers as we let the light of Christ's love shine in our personal lives and through our work in our congregation and then out to the further **ends of the earth** through our Synod's mission work supported by our prayers and offerings.

Dear friends in Christ, on Epiphany remember the light of Christ shines **From Bethlehem to the end of the earth** – Rejoice Christ shines on us and through us. Amen.

We were once darkness, but now we are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. Amen.

We sing the Song of Zechariah on page 212 in the blue hymnal. Zechariah was the father of John the Baptist and his song speaks of Jesus as the “Dawn from on High” and how John would testify to the Savior’s message of forgiveness.