

**“Light By Which To See” - Sermon by Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, Jan. 6, 2008, at North Broadway United Methodist Church, Columbus, Ohio**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

Recall that moment when you were holding that infant under the glow of the reading lamp and as if it were all of a sudden, although the maturation process had taken some time, nevertheless the child blinkingly was no longer mesmerized by the light but began to see by it. That moment when instead of just looking at the light, he or she began to see by it, and it seemed a whole new vista was opened. Light – not merely that at which we look, but that by which we see.

Years ago, when University United Methodist Church was still located in the Ohio State University campus area, each Epiphany, on January 6th in the evening, members, friends, neighbors would be invited to come to the small parking lot behind the church building and bring with them their would be discarded Christmas trees from the previous season, to bring them, stack them, pile them in order that a huge blaze might ensue. Now what I most remember about those services – that is to say after the fear of a spreading fire or police arrest had abated – what I most remember is that in the brief liturgy each year we were admonished not merely to look at the blaze but to see by its glow what Christ was illuminating in our lives for the year past and in the year stretching ahead. The Christ-light – light by which we are to see.

Now it is that kind of dynamic that we find in both of the lessons earlier read, that is to say, both the third Isaiah and Matthew want their congregations, their communities, not merely to look at but to see by the light of God. Light filled the sky, you will recall, and the Magi saw and followed. When they saw where the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. When they saw the Christ-child with Mary, his mother, they knelt down in humble adoration and worship. And when they saw through the medium of a dream the chicanery of Herod, they went home by a different way. They decided not to go to Herod but toward that kingdom of justice, kindness and humility, where love is the order of the day and reconciliation and peace the king’s consistent edict; not to go back to Herod, but to go toward the kingdom of God.

Now Matthew in his text painted this vivid picture not merely to venerate the past. Surely he wanted his people to remember and celebrate that past, but he wanted all the more to call his crest-fallen church late in the First Century to a new era of hope and radiance. It was a church steeped in rejection and despair. And so Matthew told the story vividly, asking, inviting, cajoling his congregants to emulate the Magi, to see anew the wonder of the Christ presence, and again like the Magi of old, not only to worship, not merely to venerate, but to find an enlightened way to travel, to travel the road less taken, which always leads away from Herod and to the kingdom of God which beckons.

Now the third Isaiah – you’ll recall that in the book of the prophet Isaiah there are really three Isaiahs there from three different generations. Today’s lesson is from the third or Trito-Isaiah, the Isaiah of the restoration.

Israel, you will recall, had been in Babylonian captivity for a very long time, but through the edict of Cyrus of Persia, the gates had swung open. It was possible for Israel to return home. And so, that third Isaiah, in the midst of much disorientation and despair, shouts to his people, “Arise, shine! For your light has come and the glory of the Lord

has risen upon you. Don't just look; walk through the gates. Go home by a different way."

Now friends, not just one, but a number of wags have said rightly that today's church, the church of Jesus, really needs fewer worshipers of Jesus and more followers of Jesus. That is to say, Jesus doesn't need so much worship as he does those who would follow in faithful discipleship; those who would see his way to the kingdom and follow his example.

This week's *New Yorker* magazine has a very pithy cartoon. Two guys, white guys like me, kind of done up of the establishment with obvious power are talking to one another, and one says to the other, "Young people today need heroes to follow." And the other one says, "Yes, that's right. That's why we just hired a PR firm." A PR firm instead of the real thing.

One of the reasons in our Wednesday night studies that we are going to be looking at the life, ministry and words of William Sloane Coffin is that for many he was a real-life hero. He did not need a PR firm. His life broadcast the kind of heroic discipleship that the church desperately needs today. But another reason that we are embarking on this study by viewing the video "A Lover's Quarrel with America" and then reading carefully and discussing widely his book *Credo* is that Bill Coffin in a very particular way epitomized a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Magi – one who saw by the light of Christ, fell prostrate, and dared with consummate and consistent courage to take the Jesus way toward that kingdom which is always at odds with the powers and principalities of the present age. In our Wednesday evening sessions, believe me, we will hear Bill Coffin say wondrously eloquent, disturbingly audacious, but always hauntingly illuminating things. As a result, we will be provided with brilliant light by which to see – not merely to look at good ole now-dead Bill, but instead to see by the light of his life the light of Jesus in order that we might more faithfully follow Jesus in this time and in this place – that we might take that 'road less traveled' which always is in contradistinction to the road of Herod.

Now ole Bill will shake us up. He's probably shaken some of us who saw the video earlier this morning already. He'll shake us up and cause us to refocus the light by which we travel. He'll do so as he says some pithy wonderful things, such as in a letter in May of 2004 which he wrote to me when I was deeply honored to be the first recipient of an annual award in Chicago in his honor. He said to me something like this: "Church leadership today is more given to being pious than plucky, their greatest fear being the fear of rejection." And that of course ties in to what he says that, "The greatest virtue from which all other virtues flow is the virtue of courage, in such short shrift at the church and in this nation today."

In *Credo* Bill left us many reflections of penetrating radiance like: "We don't have to make money, only a difference, and particularly in the lives society counts least and places them last." There can be, he said, no genuine personal religious conversion without a change in social attitude. "It is bad religion to deify doctrines and creeds. They are only signposts. Love is the only hitching-post." And then he said – after suffering two strokes near the end of his life; he died in '06 – he said this: "The more we do God's will, the less unfinished business we leave behind when we die. If our lives exemplify personal charity and the pursuit of social justice, then death will not be the enemy, but rather the friendly angel leading us on to the One who longs to say to each one of us, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant.'"

Light from Bill Coffin. Light not merely to mesmerize onlookers, religious light not merely to venerate, at which to look, but the light of revealed truth by which to see and then travel home by another way, the way of trusting courageous discipleship which leads to that kingdom Jesus incarnated, a kingdom of love and mercy and justice and reconciliation.

This is a pithy profound emotional day for me. To paraphrase Lou Gehrig: Today I feel like the luckiest preacher alive. That is, it is an invaluable gift to be invited to come back and be among you as a regular teacher, sometimes preacher, organizer for social justice and mentor with some of your leaders, while simultaneously serving as the part-time interim pastor of an urban African-American congregation. This two-point charge which the old bishop is riding, taps a life-long set of interests. It mines a bit of my prophetic passion and pastoral compassion. It's a really profound time. Somebody at Covenant in Springfield, the other church, said, "Now Joe, when you go back to North Broadway, especially when you preach, don't mix up the folders. That is to say, they might not be ready for your 50-minute sermons and your whooping. Be a little quieter and not quite so windy when you go over there." I'll try to keep my folders straight and my schizophrenia at bay.

Yet, the giddiness that I felt, like Lou Gehrig's disease with him, kind of came to a paralyzing halt on Wednesday last here when I learned in Sermon Shaping and in staff meeting about recent deaths, staggering illnesses and the simple aging process that have attached themselves to many that I came to find dear a decade ago in this place. This was that which followed hearing last Sunday at Covenant that the one person there I had known across a lifetime in the church has been stricken with a potentially fatal malady.

All of this set me to thinking. It sent me back to the text, to the lessons of the morning. And as I went back, I found myself hearing that the light of God's revelation and mystery and wonder by which we are to see, that Christ presence illuminating manger and faith, witnessed by the Magi and followed in trust and courage, does not only shine in and on our much doing. It does that, but it does more. The light of Christ also shines in and on our simple being. In living a life of relational trust in all of life's seasons, no matter what, come what may. Anchored in trust in the One he called Abba, Jesus was able to do what he did because of who he was. But when he could no longer do, he still was, and the light emanated from his presence.

Do you hear what I'm trying to say? The light of Christ is not only that which would radiate who we are in our doing, where it is we are to go in our justice-seeking, but it also illuminates that it is in our human being in relationship with God and with one another that the light not only shines but we see by it and give ourselves away to one another when we have nothing else left to give.

Light by which to see. Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Good news not only for doing but for being.

Finally, Coffin again. He writes – it sounds like bad news, but I think it's mighty good news – he writes, "God provides minimum protection, maximum support. Support to help us grow up, to stretch our minds and hearts until they are as wide as God's universe. God doesn't want us narrow-minded, priggish and subservient, but joyful and loving, as free for one another as God's love is for the whole world and the babe in Bethlehem's manger."

So friends, I just stopped by to say, Light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. Let us see by the light and walk in the direction of that kingdom, which is always in opposition to Herod's kingdom.