

The First Sunday In Advent - November 29, December 2 & 3, 2006
St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI 53094

SHINE LIKE STARS

This is the season of the year for lights. As you drive around our community you see many homes beautifully decorated with lights. There are lights all around the house. Inside we also put up Christmas trees and we adorn them with more lights.

Have you ever noticed the positive affect that lights have on your emotions and mood? When we have day after day of clouds and rain we can get rather depressed and down. But let the sun come out and people's spirits pick right up. Light definitely has an impact on every one of us. As we enter the winter season we have less hours of light. It gets dark by 4:30 and it doesn't get light until 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. We are moving closer to the shortest day of the year when it comes to light, December 21st, the winter solstice. Not only are we seeing less light during the day but we also live in a very wicked and dark world that does not have much light of goodness kindness and love.

As we begin the season of Advent, the four weeks prior to our celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul says to us in his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Greece, **SHINE LIKE STARS. I) We Are Light Bearers and II) We Are Light Sharers.**

WE ARE LIGHT BEARERS

Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi is one of his prison letters. Paul was under house arrest in Rome, chained to a Roman soldier and facing the real possibility that he would be put to death by the government for proclaiming the good news that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the Savior of the world and everyone who trusts in Jesus has eternal life. In this portion of his letter Paul is encouraging the Philippians and he is also encouraging you and me in our Christian life.

Christianity is not only knowing and believing certain things it is also a way of life. You and I reflect our faith in the way in which we live, the manner in which we treat others in our daily lives, the kindness, love and concern that we show for other people, the forgiveness that we freely offer to those who sin against us and upset us and make our life miserable at times. Sometimes people will say, "Well, I believe in Jesus" and then proceed to gossip about their relatives and neighbors and destroy their reputation before others. You also have people who say, "I believe in God" but rarely if ever set foot inside of God's House to listen to God's Word. There are those who say I trust Jesus as my Savior but then ignore what Jesus says about marriage and have a sexual relationship outside of marriage or are busy cheating on their husband or wife. There is a disconnect here. You say one thing with your mouth but do just the opposite with your life. Paul encourages us as people who have had our sins washed away in the blood of Jesus Christ to live a life that reflects the light that we bear.

Paul begins by praising the members of the Philippian church. He writes, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence –"(V. 12a) The people of Philippi were following the Lord Jesus and doing his word. They did it when Paul was there bringing them the good news of forgiveness and eternal life. Now even when he was gone they were more zealous in living their Christian faith. We know as parents, we tell our children to do something and we carefully watch and see that it is done, but when we leave things may not continue as they were. Our children may not continue to do what we taught them. In fact, they may do things that we have forbidden them to do. Paul had left the congregation and he was thrilled that these believers were progressing in their faith and life. They did not wander from the truth once their pastor and founder had left them.

Now Paul proceeds to encourage them in their faith life. He writes, “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you to will and to do according to his good pleasure.” (Vv. 12b-13) How do you work out your salvation? I thought we have been saved by the work of Jesus Christ. We have. But that faith that God has given us does not remain stagnant. It either grows and matures or is shrinks, becomes weak and can eventually die. So what do we do? What do you do when you get hungry or thirsty? You eat and drink. If you and I stopped eating and drinking fluids, eventually we would become physically weak and die. The same thing can happen in our spiritual life. The faith that God has graciously given to you and me through the power of his Word when we were baptized or heard that Word of Life proclaimed to us can shrivel up and die if we don’t feed and water it.

Remember we have many enemies who would love to see us be lost. We have the devil who is lurking around trying to extinguish the light of the truth from our lives. He tries whatever is possible to have us stop using the Word of God by not attending church, by not reading our Bibles daily. He would love to have us stop receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Lord’s Supper for our forgiveness and the strengthening of our faith. Paul also reminds us that we live in “a crooked and depraved generation”. (v. 15c) The unbelievers of this world would love to see us join them in rejecting the truth of God’s Word and do our own thing. Plus we have an evil, hateful and unbelieving nature that still lives in every one of us who hates God and loves to sin. We have a nature that is daily warring against the Lord and his Word. These enemies would love to extinguish the light in our lives. That is why Paul says to us, “with fear and trembling work out your own salvation.” Remember the enemies that we are battling against are not lightweights. This is a life and death struggle. But Paul also encourages us in this battle. He reminds us, “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure. God’s word is powerful and it helps us daily in our struggle against our enemies that continue to try and put the light out. That is why it is so important that you and I use the weapons that God has given us so that we remain in the faith and in the truth.

As we do this the Apostle also says, “Do everything without complaining or arguing so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God, without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.” (Vv. 14-15) We recognize that in this life we will never be totally without sin; however we need to strive to continue to conform our actions, our words and our thoughts to the will of our loving and forgiving God. But when we do things without complaining, arguing and grumbling we are without fault in this corrupt world in which we live. We really shine as stars. We are not the grumblers, the bellyachers; the ones who have nothing good to say about anything. We are able to speak the truth in love, to marvel at the amazing work of God in this world and see the beauty of what God can and does accomplish through his word. As we do this we are letting our light shine before others so that they may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven.

We are light bearers. God has caused his light to shine into our lives and is allowing us to let that light shine brightly in this dark world.

WE ARE LIGHT SHARERS

Not only are we shining like stars but Paul also reminds us, “In which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life - in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.” (Vv. 15c-16) We are able to share the light with the world.

We are holding out the word of life. Not only do our lives and attitudes attract people to our Savior Jesus, but we have the opportunity over and over again to tell people the good news, to share the light. We are able to proclaim to people that they have a God who really does love them. He loves them not just with words but with actions. As Christmas gets closer we are able to point to that manager and say, “See how much God loves every one of us. He personally came down from his throne in glory to become one of us.” We can point to the cross and say, “See how much God cares about you. He sacrificed his only Son for you on that cross so that you might have true and lasting peace and an eternal home with him in heaven

You know that our work is not for nothing. Paul makes this comment about the Philippians, “in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.” (v. 16) Paul is not boasting about what he had accomplished. He is boasting in what God had accomplished through him. Paul knew it was not him; it was the Lord Jesus who was causing these things to happen. Paul was just one of God’s agents that the Lord was using at this time. You and I are also God’s agents whom the Lord has used to share his light with others. Every one of us has been used by the Lord to impact the lives of other people. It may be the children we are raising or have raised. It may be someone that you brought to church. It may be someone that you had the opportunity to tell what Jesus Christ meant in your life and how he helped you through some difficult or trying time. Most of us can think of people whom we have touched with the light as lived our lives and as we have shared our faith with others.

As Paul concludes this section he makes this comment, “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.” (Vv. 17-18) What’s Paul talking about? He was facing the real possibility that he was going to be put to death for what he had done in Philippi and throughout the Roman Empire where he had established Christian congregations. Paul is talking about his possible death. Paul is saying, “Even if I am put to death for the faith you have which God used me to proclaim to you, I rejoice that I had the opportunity to be God’s agent to bring you the truth. And if I die you should rejoice and be glad for me.” Why would they rejoice and be glad for Paul? Because as Paul had written earlier in this letter, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1:21)

We are stars. We are stars shining in a very dark and gloomy world. The light we bear is the light of truth – the truth of God’s Word. The light that we share – is the message of free and full forgiveness through the babe of Bethlehem, Jesus Christ, your Savior and mine, the Savior of all. This is the Savior who has made it possible for us to face death with the assurance that it is our entrance into the presence of Jesus Christ in heaven.

Amen.