

**"God's Plans for Saint Mark's
in 2007 and Beyond"**

**Sermon: 2 Corinthians 4:3-7
Weekend of January 7, 2007
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
Pastor Karl Walther**

Isaiah tells us: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.* Jesus is the fulfillment of those words for us! Amen.

God's Word for our special consideration on this Festival of the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ is Second Corinthians, chapter four, verses three through seven. There the Apostle Paul, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, writes to the Corinthian congregation as follows:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

This is God's Spirit-inspired Word of Jesus Christ.

Introduction: What Does the Year 2007 Hold for Saint Mark's?

Dear fellow Christians—on whom Christ's light now shines:

We are seven days deep into the Year of our Lord Two Thousand Seven. So, what do you suppose the Year Two Thousand Seven is going to hold for Saint Mark's?

That's an intriguing question, isn't it? And of course, only God really knows the answer! There's nothing wrong, though – in fact, it's probably a godly thing – for us to make some educated guesses....

What will the Year Two Thousand Seven bring to Saint Mark's? Well, we'll probably plan much more extensively for a building program. Back in Nineteen Eighty-Seven, we laid the foundation for our Parish Center. Back in Nineteen Ninety-Seven, we restored the church. And there seems to be a consensus that in the year Two Thousand Seven, we should get serious about addressing our needs at Saint Mark's School. That way we can all the better serve our families and our community with the good news of Jesus there.

Of course, constructing buildings is sort of exciting, but that's only because buildings house people, through whom the dear Lord does the work of the church. And the year Two Thousand Seven is liable to bring new people to serve us. The faculty at school will more than likely have a new face or two—particularly, God willing, a capable full-time administrator. We'll probably have a new person or two on this side of the street, as well. We're looking for Christ to send to us a Minister of Music and a Business Manager or Church Administrator—gifts, in part, from an endowment a year or so back.

Refurbished buildings and new faces are exciting. Wrestling with big ideas is important, too. I foresee that in the year Two Thousand Seven, we will start a congregational conversation on the meaning of membership at Saint Mark's. (I mean: Does membership mean merely that one time, maybe many years ago, you joined our

church—and at least so far you haven't let us know you'd like "out"? Or does membership mean more: that you actually attend Saint Mark's?) Another big idea to wrestle with, of course, is how we're actually going to support the ambitious work we've always aimed to do for the Lord.

Of course, the best conversation of all for us to have in the year Two Thousand Seven is this: How can we help Saint Mark's to grow? Nah, let me put that a little better: What can we at Saint Mark's do to help God's Church on earth to grow? That is: What can we do so that more of Saint Mark's members grow in confidence in Christ? And: What can we do so that other people besides us gain confidence in Christ?

Along exactly those lines, one of our questions might be: Are we just one really dynamic leader away from really taking off here at church? Or from a different perspective: Would the loss of just one really dynamic leader put our church – or any other church – in decline? Well, it's those questions, among others, that get answered in God's Word to us today....

Background: First Century Corinth Is Like Twenty-First Century America

As God's Word to us today opens up, it's about twenty-five years after Jesus died in penalty for our sins and rose to deliver to us the promise of life eternal. And it's almost two thousand years ago. Back at that time the Apostle Paul was God's main man to deliver the gospel message to most of the world. He was on his Third Missionary Journey, in northern Greece, a full one thousand miles away from the capital city of God's saving activity, back in Jerusalem. Paul is writing a second letter down to Corinth, a couple hundred miles to the south, a town where Paul had founded a Christian congregation on his Second Missionary Journey, some four years earlier or so.

Now, first century Corinth, to which Paul was writing, was a lot like twenty-first century America. The Corinthians were immoral in a widespread way—especially sexually. The Corinthians practically worshipped their own pleasure—plus a whole host of false gods. And the few who were Christians were messed up by false teaching, confused by all the fly-by-night false teachers who came to their town.

Part One: Satan Blinds Unbelievers' Minds to the Gospel Message

A lot of the Corinthian Christians began asking, "If what we have believed – if what Paul preached – is so true, then why don't more people believe it? That's what the Apostle Paul answers in God's Word to us today: *And even if our gospel is veiled* – Paul admits: there are no few who just "don't get it" – *it is veiled to those who are perishing*. The ones who "don't get" the gospel are (literally here) "the ones who are in the process of being destroyed". And who wants to follow their pathway, anyway?!

You see: *The god of this age* – Satan, whose hatred for the good news of Jesus rules the world at large – *The god of the this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers* – they're so caught up in their good time, they don't see Jesus; they're so sure of their own personal decency that they don't think they need him; they're so afraid of what their wrongdoing might bring them that they won't even plan for Jesus' future judgment.

It means: *that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*. A quarter century earlier, such unbelievers had God himself, Jesus Christ, right in front of their very eyes. And though Paul still portrayed Jesus as God himself and Savior, they still did not trust Jesus.

It's that way yet today! Most people – even today, even in America – just don't get it. Satan has succeeded in getting them so focused on their good time, or feeling good about themselves or at least their life in this world, that they miss their need for Christ.

And you and I were born into the world thinking exactly the same. That's the attitude we'll fall back into, if we're not careful!

Part Two: God's Gospel Message Drives Out Sin and Unbelief

That's why it's so valuable for us to have a place to go to hear a different message every week—even every day. We need a place to go where the message isn't our entertainment, but rather our repentance—and our eternal pleasure in heavenly glory. We need a place to go where the message is not our self-esteem, but rather our sober self-inventory—and God's inestimable love for us in Christ. We need a place to go where the message isn't our life in this world, but rather our confidence in Christ—for this world and for the world to come.

As Paul puts it: *For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.* Jesus is the message. God's messengers are his servants to proclaim Jesus, and not themselves. Why? *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.* It was God's all-powerful Word, on the first day of the history of this universe, which created light. And where light is present, darkness cannot coexist. Similarly, it was God's all-powerful Word, on the first day of each Christian life, which created confidence in Jesus the Savior. And where such righteous light exists, the darkness of sin cannot coexist.

Thank God! – it is God's all-powerful Word which does the same today. Thank God that, on the day you were baptized, it was not the white robes, nor your sponsors, nor your feeble assent that did anything, but God's all-powerful Word—in which Jesus washed away your sins and the Holy Spirit lit up your heart with faith in him. Thank God that, when you receive Lord's Supper, it is not your personal preparation, nor the form of the bread and wine, nor your personal posture which does anything, but God's all-powerful Word—in which Jesus feeds you with forgiveness and the Holy Spirit brightens your soul with confidence in Christ.

And thank God, and understand: When you come to church, we pastors are not going to make you laugh like Jay Leno or David Letterman. We're not going to aim to make you feel good about yourself like Doctor Phil or Oprah. And we're not really going to talk much about our own experiences either. What you're going to hear – in fact, you should demand to do so! – is that a bright Light entered this dark world two thousand years ago, that this bright Light shone for you for a whole lifetime, that this bright Light was in effect snuffed out for your sins – yet never burned more brightly than on that day! – and that this bright beam is the Light that guides your path to glory.

Part Three: God's Servants Preach Christ to His People

And then, don't be troubled that the guys through whom you often glimpse that Light are not particularly noteworthy! Paul writes: *But we have this treasure* – we have this great news of light and life through Jesus Christ – *We have this treasure in jars of clay* – human bodies: Adam's came originally from the ground, and to this day our bodies are just as fragile as clay vessels – *We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.* It's the contents that counts, and not the vessel. It's the message – Jesus! – that counts, and not the messenger.

And so, children: you have jars of clay – Mom and Dad – who speak the gospel to you. They will fall short; they are sinful human beings. But: listen to what they tell you about Jesus the Savior! And students: you have jars of clay – your teachers – who speak

the gospel to you. They will fall short; they are sinful human beings. But: listen to what they tell you about Jesus the Savior!

And members of Saint Mark's: you have jars of clay – among them are those named Jensen, Walther, and Werner – who speak the gospel to you. We're nothing in particular to look at. We're not as exciting as that Christmas present you asked for and received. We're not as warm and fuzzy as the blanket on your bed. But we do tell you the story of Jesus. Listen to the story of Jesus. That's the important thing. That's what's going to rescue you.

Conclusion: Proclaiming God's Gospel Message Is His Plan for St Mark's

So, the year Two Thousand Seven is here. It's sort of exciting! Here at church we may talk about building, we may have some new folks serving us, and we may discuss and settle some big and interesting questions. Furthermore, we are equipped with everything we need to accomplish all that. We've got the good news of Jesus: the Light of the world and our personal Savior.

We don't need more dynamic leadership, because Christ is our Leader. We don't need to fear the loss of any leadership, because Christ is our Leader. It's very simple, really. Satan is the problem; he blinds unbelievers' minds. God's gospel message is the solution; Jesus drives out sin and unbelief. And we pastors will continue to serve you long after Epiphany is over by preaching to you Epiphany's Light, Jesus Christ.

He will deliver to us a bright New Year—no matter what our circumstances!
Amen.

Isaiah promised: *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.* God grant that we preach Jesus far and wide, so that he may all the more fulfill those words—among us and through us! Amen.