

Much Ado About Something!  
Much Ado About The Light Of The World!  
Matthew 4:12-23

Earlier this week, just before dawn, as I was driving west out of Canon City, Colorado on U.S. Highway 50, the sun topped the ridges behind me to the east and cast its bright light on the snow-covered peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, located just off to my west. Suddenly, those towering crags emerged from their dusky shadows and began to glow with the salmon tones of a January sunrise, as wisps of white cloud rose from their cold clefts and wreathed themselves around the mountain shoulders like cotton shawls of orangish amber. It was absolutely stunning! And I must confess that my mood was lifted as high as those peaks just by watching the sunrise reflected from them!

People often ask me how I like the drive from Canon City to Woodland Park. So far, I love it – in part for the sunrises I see most mornings as I drive those long, lonely miles along quiet stretches of Colorado blacktop! In fact, I think everyone with any sense about them loves the dawn in Colorado. Nearly every morning, the sky sheds its velvet blackness and takes up the apricot halo of another bright morning! And no wonder we love it so. We were, after all, created to be creatures of the light! And so, we yearn, especially in this season of long winter nights, for the sun to rise on us with its warm healing rays.

In today's reading from Saint Matthew's gospel, Matthew tells us that Jesus' appearance was like the rising of the sun on a dark and despairing world. The opening verse sets the scene and establishes the dark moral tone of the times. According to Matthew, "When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee." (Mt. 4:12) You see, John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod Antipas for scolding Herod over Herod's adulterous relationship with his half-brother's wife, which was, by the way, just one of his many cruelties and crimes. Herod would later compound this sin by having John beheaded and his head presented on a platter during Herod's own birthday feast! What a party that must have been! It was just one example of the dark decadence that prevailed in that day.

At about the same time as John's arrest, it seems Jesus was threatened by the citizens of his own hometown, Nazareth, who were so offended by Jesus' teaching that they tried to hurl Jesus from a cliff. (Lk. 4:16-31) In such a threatening environment as this, Jesus found it judicious to withdraw to the city of Capernaum, where he might find a safer climate in which to minister.

Now Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience and eager to convince the Jews that Jesus was their Messiah, plundered the Hebrew scriptures in search of a verse or two to justify this move and demonstrate that Jesus was indeed fulfilling the prophecies of old. And lo and behold, Matthew found just such a passage in the prophecy of Isaiah to satisfy his need. So, Matthew said, "Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of (the Jewish tribes of) Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,

on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death (a) light has dawned.” (Mt. 4:13-16) Yes, Jesus presence was like a great light shining in a dark time on a people who sat in the darkness of despair and the shadows of a sad degradation!

But what kind of light was Jesus? For that matter, what kind of light is he now? Well I think he was and is a Piercing Light, a Purging Light, a Guiding Light, and a Healing Light. You see, Jesus was and is a Piercing Light. He shines his light in our dark world to expose our moral and spiritual darkness. That’s why Matthew adds these words to the prophecy he quotes. Matthew says, “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.’ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” (Mt. 4:16-17)

Yes, Jesus was and is a Piercing Light! He came among us, and comes among us still, to expose our spiritual and our moral darkness with the bright light of his pure life and his peerless teaching! And so, he says, “Repent! Change your mind and change your ways and clean up your act!” You see, next to him, we realize just how sinful we really are, and so we say what the apostle Peter once said when he found himself in the presence of this Jesus: “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” (Lk. 5:8 KJV) Yes, Jesus is a Piercing Light who comes among us to expose our spiritual and our moral darkness with the bright light of his pure life and his peerless teaching!

Now I suspect all of us have had this kind of experience. In the evening, as the sun is setting and the shadows are gathering, we straighten up some room in our home and think it perfectly clean until the next day, when the sun rises in its full strength, and we realize just how dirty the room still is! Well that’s what happens when the Piercing Light of Jesus shines on our lives. He exposes our moral and spiritual darkness and calls us to repent! My friend, have you done that? Do you do that regularly whenever he shines on some aspect of your life that is an embarrassment to his kingdom and his way?

But Jesus isn’t only a Piercing Light, he is a Purging Light as well. He not only calls us to repent, change our minds, and change our ways, and clean up our acts, but he helps with the cleansing process. He purges the filth from us and makes us clean! I remember once helping my wife with the laundry when I came across a very stubborn stain. I had washed the garment but the stain remained. That’s when my wife let me in on a little secret. “Lay it in the sun,” she said, “and you’ll see what happens.” So, I laid it in the sun and the stain disappeared! There are some stains that are only purged by the light! And there are some stains that we can never scrub clean on our own! They have to be purged by the light of another! They have to be laid in the bright light of Jesus – only he can make them clean!

Is there some stubborn stain in your life that just won’t come out? Then lay it in the light of Jesus. Get close to him. Read his word frequently. Pray to him daily. Worship him weekly. Hang out with his people regularly and see if that doesn’t have some cleansing effect.

And then follow the Light wherever he leads! For you see, Jesus is not only a Piercing Light and a Purging Light, but he's also a Guiding Light! After quoting the ancient prophecy identifying Jesus as a Light shining in this world of darkness, Matthew then told the following tale: "As (Jesus) walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him." (Mt. 4:18-22)

You see, Jesus became their Guiding Light! He called them to follow him, and their lives were transformed in the process! As they followed their Guiding Light, they went to new places, they did new things, they learned new lessons, and they became new men! And the same thing happens to us whenever we follow our Guiding Light. He'll take us to new places. He'll teach us new things. He'll give us new hearts and new minds as we faithfully follow him! That's why Jesus 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) Are you following Jesus as your Guiding Light – and are you doing that every day?

Yes, Jesus is a Piercing Light, a Purging Light, and Guiding Light, and finally, he's a Healing Light! After quoting the ancient prophecy identifying Jesus as a Light shining in this world of darkness, Matthew concludes this section with these words: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom *and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*" (Mt. 4:23)

My friend, there are some maladies of mind, and body, and spirit, that only the Light can heal! For example, when our children were newborns, they each suffered from a bit of jaundice. And their jaundice was treated by laying them beneath a special light. You see, that special light held a healing cure. Or take, as another example, the psychological condition known as SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder. Some years ago, when we moved to Rhode Island, my wife noticed that she wasn't feeling herself. Her mood was a bit depressed. She was sadder and less energetic than normal, and that without any apparent cause or explanation. But upon reflection, she concluded that she was suffering from SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder – caused by the longer winters and the diminished sunlight we experienced while living on Aquidneck Island in the Narraganset Bay. That, by the way, is one reason she likes living here in Colorado where there's so much more sun to soak in. Yes, there are some maladies of mind, and body, and spirit, that only the Light can heal!

Jesus came as a Healing Light to shine on those sitting in darkness and in the shadows of death. And his shining often brings healing! Yes, living in his light often brings healing, or at least greater health, to body, mind, and spirit. I wonder how many maladies might otherwise be avoided, or reduced, or even healed, if we followed his guiding light into his healing light more often! It's hard to tell, but I suspect it might be many.

My friends, this is the last in our Epiphany series of sermons entitled “Much Ado About Something.” In this series we have explored various reasons why we make so much ado about the birth of Jesus Christ. After all, he was just a poor peasant child born in ancient Palestine. Or was he?

In the first sermon of this series we saw that we make much ado about Jesus’ birth because he was born as God among us – God in human flesh and form. In the second sermon of this series we saw that we make much ado about Jesus’ birth because he was born to be our Lord – and not only ours, but also the Lord of all people, everywhere at all times! In last week’s sermon we saw that we make much ado about Jesus’ birth because he was born to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, to include your sin and mine. And finally, this week we see that we make much ado about Jesus’ birth because he is the Light of the World who shines on our darkened world as a Piercing Light, a Purging Light, a Guiding Light, and a Healing Light. Oh, how our world needs his light!

My friend, have you let his piercing light do its work in your heart, exposing your sin and calling you to repentance? Have you let his purging light do its work in your soul, purifying those stains that you can’t wash away? Have you let his guiding light lead you step-by-step and day by day? And finally, do you need his healing light to heal some malady of body, mind, or spirit? Then remember what I said, just moments ago about appropriating his purifying power: Lay yourself in the light of Jesus. Get close to him. Read his word frequently. Pray to him daily. Worship him weekly. Hang out with his people regularly and see if that doesn’t have some healing effect. For the people who sat in darkness have seen a Great Light! Let all who have seen that Light now say...Amen!