As revised and delivered at WOL

January 15, 2017 – Ascension; January 22, 2017 – Water of Life

Isaiah 9:2

There is a large stained-glass window in one of our Wisconsin Synod churches in southwestern Michigan with a bright orange ball in the center and rays streaming out from it in every direction. That window forms the entire end-wall of that church, so that everyone’s attention is focused on it. In fact at certain times of the year when the sun is just right you almost need sunglasses when you leave the service. That window gives an unusual, but very vivid picture for the worshippers in that congregation. For that bright orange sun symbolizes the source of light, warmth, and joy for the lives of each one of us. That stained-glass sun pictures Jesus Christ. The Old Testament prophet Malachi called him the Sun of Righteousness – that’s S-U-N. He bursts into our lives like the bright sun at dawn and wakes us from darkness to light. His beams bring spiritual healing to our troubled hearts and minds. His rays light the path through life to Heaven. Today, as we gather to worship in the afterglow of another Christmas celebration, I have a joyful message to share – a message which says that we are more blessed than prophets of the Old Testament because WE, WHO WALKED IN DARKNESS, HAVE SEEN A GREAT LIGHT.

It is said that the work of Christians is “to trouble the comfortable and to comfort the troubled.” To the person who is complacent and content in a sinful, godless way of life, the Christian has a troubling message. It is the message of God’s holiness and justice. It is the message that says: *“The wages of sin is death.”* The message that says: *“It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Heb 10:31). But to the person troubled in his conscience and bothered by his sin; the Christian message is one of great comfort: *“Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven…. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”*

Bible-based preaching begins with bad news. We share something in common with all other human beings on the face of this planet – sin. We all sin – and you don’t need a Bible to tell you that. Each of us has a conscience, and it tells us that we have fallen far short of being perfect. And yet that’s God’s standard: *“Be perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”* We recognize that our sin deserves punishment.

In our text Isaiah describes our natural condition as “walking in darkness.” Darkness is the more dangerous time of the day. It’s the time of most crime and violence; the time when traveling is more difficult; the time it’s easier to stumble over something and fall. That’s why the Holy Scriptures so often uses the picture of light vs. darkness. By birth because of our sinful nature, all of us walk in spiritual darkness – blindly groping our way along through life, unable to see the way to God. The best of human minds cannot shed any real light on the deep spiritual matters of God and eternity. Human wisdom leaves us doomed to spend an eternity in pitch blackness separated from God’s light.

The people of Eastern Europe where I’ve served the past ten years were trapped behind the Iron Curtain. It was almost impossible for them to travel to the West. The people of Albania – a country where we have a small mission church -- were captives of a paranoid dictator who closed the country’s borders and locked the people in. In most places the communists shut down the Lutheran churches and imprisoned or killed many of the Lutheran pastors. Albania went a big step further and forbade all religious activities by all religions. Under communism the people lived behind fences, walls and barbed wire. Well, the sinfulness with which we were born and the sin we committed put a wall between us and God -- a wall that was even more impenetrable than the Iron Curtain. Some people got through the Iron Curtain, but we could not get through the wall built by our sinfulness. No efforts of our part, no good works, could breach that wall which separated us from God. But Christ felt compassion on us. Just like he caused the Iron Curtain to be ripped apart, so he smashed down the wall sin had built – smashed it down by his righteous life and his innocent suffering and death.

Isaiah writes about 700 B.C. to a nation that has fallen away from God. He writes about God’s judgment about to come on that nation. He writes, hoping to call the people to repentance so harsh judgment would not be necessary. But throughout his book you will also find a message of comfort and assurance. “You can still trust in the goodness and promises of God. God still has big plans for our nation because he has promised to send the Savior of the world through us.” In our text he writes: *In the past* [God] *humbled the land of Zebulum and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee…* The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali were the northernmost tribes of Israel, and so the ones first and foremost to feel the brunt of enemy attacks. They will become the home region of the Savior. Jesus would grow up and live in that northern region and carry out most of his public ministry there.

Isaiah is known as the evangelist of the Old Testament, the Good News preacher, because of the clear and beautiful prophecies of Jesus in his book. We Bible-believing Christians intend to be the evangelists of our day. We are part of a nation-wide body of evangelical churches; it’s called the Wisconsin EVANGELICAL Lutheran Synod. You intend to show your stripes also by the formal name of your congregation. You are Water of Life EVANGELICAL Lutheran Church.

The word *evangelical* comes from the Greek word *euangelion. Euangelion* means “Good News.” In the Bible it is often translated “Gospel.” The *euangelion* of the Bible, its Good News, is that Jesus Christ, true God, came into this world to be our Savior, so we can enjoy eternal life in Heaven. When we identify ourselves as *evangelical* Lutherans in an evangelical Lutheran church, we are saying that we are “Good-News-Believing” Christians in a “Good-News-Preaching” church.

As evangelical Lutherans, we know that God has come to rescue us from the darkness. Isaiah says: [You who were] *walking in darkness have seen a great light; on* [you who were] *living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.* God has sent light into this world – in the person of Jesus Christ. He comes to shine with spiritual light into our sin-darkened hearts, freeing us from Satan’s darkness. He comes to turn us from the works of evil and the fears of darkness. He comes to quiet the conscience, racked by guilt, on the verge of despair. He comes to rule his people and govern all things for our good. He comes to lead us down the clear, bright path to eternal blessing. *I am the light of the world,* he says, *whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12).* By the grace of God we have seen that Great Light and been called out of our darkness to believe in him. That Great Light is shining in our hearts and lives as he leads us down the path to eternal light.

There’s another thing to be said to people like us who have seen the Great Light. The Light himself said to us: *You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven* (Mt 5:14-16). I grew up in the Bible Belt, and I still remember the bumper stickers. One of my favorites was: “If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” God has called you out of the darkness so that you may let your light shine. In the olden days of the gas street-lamps, each evening at dusk the lamp-lighter would walk through the streets, stopping at each lamp, touching it with his fire and lighting it. Before him was darkness, but everywhere he went, he left behind a stream of light. In just this way God goes through the world touching people, lighting them with the light of Christ, leaving them as a stream of light in the world. You see Christ’s light shining in us changes us – not overnight – but steadily and surely according to God’s timetable. I hope each of you has seen that power of God causing you to mature spiritually over the course of your life. Each Christian should be able to say: “I’m not what I should be; I’m not what I’m going to be; but thank God, I’m not what I was.”

A little girl, observing a beautifully colored church window radiant with light, asked her mother: “Who are the people in that window?” Her mother replied: “Those are the saints!” “Oh,” said the child, “Now I know what saints are. They are people who let the light shine through.” Yes, the saints, and that’s all of us who believe in the Savior Jesus Christ, are people who let the light of Christ shine through. By their words and deeds, those who have seen the Great Light radiate that light to those around them. *You are a chosen people… a people belonging to God,* the Bible says, *that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.*

Darkness can bring on depression. The long hours of darkness, especially in northern regions in the winter, cast a blanket of gloom over the days. In countries like Sweden, which have long nights and very short days during the winter, doctors instruct patients to sit under special lights to make up for the lack of natural sunlight. Even some work places have *sun rooms* for workers to go and sit.Isaiah tells us that Jesus Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, the Light of the World, lifts the darkness, gloom and depression from the lives of those who believe in him. *There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress….* [Christ has] *enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before* [Christ] *as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.* In a word life lived in the light of Christ is a life of JOY.

Like people enjoying the bounty of a good harvest, Isaiah writes, we are *well-fed.* The daily news bombards us with tragic events and depressing facts. The “Inspiring America” segment, that short upbeat story at the end of the nightly NBC newscast, can’t erase the 25 minutes of tragedy and disaster which came before. But because of what Jesus has done for us, you and I are well-fed. We have all that we truly need, all that has lasting, eternal value. In the troubled last times in which we live, there remains for us joy. This world is passing away; a better world awaits us.

It is the prophet Malachi in the last chapter of the Old Testament who described a Christian’s joy with a memorable picture. Malachi writes: *“You will go out and leap like calves released from the stall”* (2). Most of us have spent very little time on a farm, but we have no trouble understanding Malachi’s picture. The picture is of young calves who have been cooped up in a pen because of cold or stormy weather, and then on the first sunny day are released to go out into pasture -- something like school children released for recess after a few rainy days stuck in the classrooms. The calves released from the pen will be frolicking and playful as they enjoy the room to run around, the fresh air, the green grass, and the warm rays of the sun. This is the reaction that the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, produces in us. The gloomy skies in our lives caused by our guilty conscience, the threatening storm clouds of death and judgment – these have been driven away by the sun breaking through. The doubts, worries and anxieties of this life are only temporary. We can frolic like calves, released from the stall to play in the warm sun and fresh grass. You and I are Jesus’ little calves. Malachi’s beautiful picture opens up a whole new theme for Christian music and art. We can sing: “I am Jesus’ little Calf; he makes me leap and laugh.” Over our beds we can hang a picture of Jesus’ carrying a baby cow while surrounded by a herd of cows. I’m not sure we’re ready for: “The Lord is my cowboy; I shall not want,” but there is Scriptural basis for such a poetic picture. We can feel the joy of calves released from the confining pen to run freely and happily. Such joy is ours through faith in Jesus.

Imagine the sight over the fields of Bethlehem that first Christmas night. Suddenly the dark sky was ablaze with light. Glory – like that which could come only from Heaven – filled the skies. The angel who caused all this splendor, spoke announcing the birth of Jesus. And then the sky was filled with a whole army of angels – a heavenly choir which sang out: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.* It was a most splendid sight! Splendor like that probably won’t be matched again until Jesus returns. Out of the heavenly gates he will ride like a glorious rider on a splendid white horse. He’ll be dressed in a robe dipped in blood and across the robe in clear letters this name is written: “King of kings and Lord of lords.” The armies of Heaven will follow him as he sweeps across the battlefield, crushing the forces amassed against him. Satan and his allies will be captured and thrown into the fiery lake of eternal torment. The believers will be gathered from throughout the world and taken into the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. *That city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light…On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there* (Rev 21:23). On that day Isaiah’s prophecy, *the people have seen a great light,* will have reached perfect and complete fulfillment!

Jesus Christ is shining for us -- WE, WHO WALKED IN DARKNESS, HAVE SEEN A GREAT LIGHT. Go forth in joy – and don’t be afraid to let your light and joy in Christ show. You are evangelical Lutherans – you know the Good News that you are Jesus’ little calves!

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*Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything.*