

Set Yourself on Fire and the World Will Come to Watch You Burn!
Epiphany Sunday
Isaiah 60: 1-6

Let me show you my new hat (put on pink Minnie hat). Actually Rebecca wants you to know that it's hers and I am just borrowing it for a few moments. Guess where we went over the Christmas holiday? That is right...the land of the mouse or DisneyWorld in Orlando. What a fantastic time we had. There must have been a million people there from every nation on the planet. The Christmas decorations, special shows and fabulous lights made it the best trip ever. One of the most popular and dramatic shows on our trip was featured in a ten thousand person amphitheater in MGM Studios. It is called *Fantasmic* and it is spectacular. The place was packed and we stood in the "SRO" section in the back of the theater. From total darkness emerged a dazzling display of lights, lighting effects, throbbing music and fireworks that depict as only Disney can do it the classic battle between good and evil. Evil was personified as every scary character from all those Disney films of the past – Maleficent from Sleeping Beauty, Scar from Lion King, and Jafar from Aladdin, just to name a few. After a truly scary light show of these dark characters, Mickey prevails in goodness with a crescendo of dazzling lights and fireworks. It was breathtaking and left the 10,000 or so in attendance buzzing for a long time after leaving the theater.

Epiphany exposes us each year to the blinding light of God's love embodied in the Christ birth event. It is the ultimate victory of God's good light over the evil of the darkness of the world. The prophet Isaiah exposes us to this brilliant light of Israel's call of becoming a beaming light to the nations, awaking from the darkness of exile; the magi, coming from the furthest reaches of the East, are drawn and guided by the blinding light

of the Star of Bethlehem. Their only response is to pay praise and tribute to the newborn King. The theme word for Isaiah that sums up all this energy and light is “glory.” There is a new dawn in which the star of Israel is reborn to be the new light to all the gentile world. Everyone seems to be energized in this high-energy poem of God’s revealed light to all the world. It is one of the most powerful and electric images of all of Isaiah. It reminds us of the witness of the psalmist in psalm 139 as he shares with us the good news that to God even the darkness seems to be all-encompassing glowing, even blinding light. Matthew ties this blinding image to the miracle of the incarnation communicated to all the world through the celestial miracle of a kind of supernova occurring in the evening sky.

What in the natural world do you think of when you think of the most life-giving, brilliant, powerful force in our universe? What force does your moment-by-moment existence literally depend on? If for a moment this force was not with us we would enveloped in darkness and icy coldness. Of course it is our Sun – our closest star! Maybe you’re like me and have wondered in non-technical terms how the Sun actually works. Let me give you a highly simplified explanation. A warning: I am both a former English major and computer salesman so I am given to poetic license and hyperbole. The Sun works on the principle of nuclear fusion of its two common elements – hydrogen and helium. The Sun is made up of approximately 75% hydrogen. The balance is principally helium, a much heavier element. Now the Sun is also a huge mass, much larger than the earth, although made up of gases. So as you know from your high school physics, huge masses are subject to huge forces of gravity exerting unbelievable pressure on itself. The elements at the core of the Sun cause such huge pressure that hydrogen atom pairs are

scrunched together into one (fused). Through a complex chemical process four atoms of Helium are formed. So the fire of the Sun burns hydrogen (light material) to produce helium (heavier material). These gases move outward from the core through several layers called the radioactive and convective layers to the outside layer – the corona – still maintaining a temperature of several million degrees Fahrenheit. And this process has continued without interruption for at least 8 billion years. The rays of the sun have sustained life on this planet since its inception. And with God's providence will continue to sustain life in billions of forms for several more billion years. I can barely fathom the power and blinding light of this star so many millions of miles away from our little planet.

The fire of our Sun has inspired the images of our faith and other faiths of the world. It is this ultimate source of physical light that has allowed us to form the symbolic understanding our Creator's power and love in images of the fire of the Holy Spirit, the light of the world in Jesus Christ, the warmth of the presence of the Trinity. It also inspires the fiery images of hell contained in many fire-and-brimstone sermons. One fiery preacher who organized our denomination was John Wesley. Now I think of Wesley more as administrative genius than fiery preacher, more a visionary reformer of the Church of England than theologian. I have read many of his sermons and they are dull and thick compared to what we hear nowadays. But I also know that he attracted huge crowds of people out in open fields – sometimes over 10,000 people – larger than that amphitheater in which I witnessed Fantasmic. And people were deeply moved and spurred back to Christ. Wesley attracted hundreds of thousands to Christ and millions more through his successors over the last three hundred years. Once someone asked

Wesley how he did it. He said, "I set myself on fire and people come to watch me burn." Who in the pulpit today sets themselves on fire and attracts people in huge numbers in huge numbers to watch them burn. Now a few negative images may come to mind. But a few positive ones come to mind as well....Billy Graham for one. Now you may argue with me but I include our brother here in town, Joel Osteen, in this category of preacher. Now cynics may find much to criticize in Osteen's simple message. Much of that is inspired by jealousy, by the way. But what makes him attract such a large following? I think his energetic positivism sets him on fire and attracts millions who want to hear of God's passionate, fiery love. And they bring large gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to fuel his ministry machine.

I hold up Wesley and the more controversial example of Osteen to illustrate a point as we move into a new year and reflect on the blinding, attracting power of the first epiphany. Epiphany reminds us of the importance of how the *transforming and irradiating effects of life in God's presence. If this is your life, set yourself on fire and the world will come and watch you burn.* A kind of spiritual, nuclear fusion is possible for the people of Bering in 2008. We can transmit through our witness the winsome, warm, brilliant light of this star that we know as the Christ. But we have to ask ourselves, "Just how do we light ourselves on fire?" Skeptics warn of phoniness or some kind of showy religious display. After all Jesus found fault with phony, pretentious religious practices. We must be genuine. So what are the genuine elements of our passion? Where do we find spiritual hydrogen and spiritual helium in our own personal chemistry? How do we light ourselves on fire in 2008?

I suggest that the lighter elements, the hydrogen of our being, can be found in what Wesley called works of piety. Works of piety that build devotion to God through intense prayer life, Scripture reading, fasting, and cultivating the inner life with God. The output of these faithful activities is that you will build faith, hope and love which will show in a glowing attitude that shows to others. They will be attracted to that faith and want to follow you. I encourage you if you want to burn with a fire that others will follow as they come into our presence to cultivate these spiritual resources in 2008. The heavier elements of human and nuclear fusion are in the heavy lifting of what Wesley called “acts of mercy.” These are the activities in which we bond in spiritual community with one another in doing random acts of kindness for the poor and disenfranchised. These are the communal activities in which the spirit of Methodism grew in its earliest days. What kept people growing in faith and in friendship with one another were these selfless acts of mercy.

What are the light and dark experiences of our lives? Where God has seemed closest we experience the light of Epiphany; where God seems absent or far away we experience darkness. Maybe in the past year we’ve experienced the death of a loved one, an event that seems so ever-present this time of year. Maybe we are grieving other losses right now where the sadness hovers over us like a night that will not end. Look to the Sun. Feel the warmth and the light. Set yourself on fire so that others will come to watch you burn. On Christmas Eve all over the globe people of faith raised their candles and went out into the world to be little lights, little Christs. Now we need to go to the next level. So Rise and shine! You are all little suns you know. But it’s your choice. You can either be a cooling agent or a warming agent. The processes of the energy produced

in you attracts more little lights to you. Ultimately this light burns for the world in Christian community. When it is harnessed it produces a kind of spiritual energy that is truly fantasmic and for which a darkened world is truly seeking.