

ADVENT SYMBOLS: The Light -- The Star
The Light enlightens men to salvation -- The star is God leading us to the Light.

Isaiah 49:5,6

TEXT: *And now the LORD says-- he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength-- he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.*

In Jesus' name, my fellow redeemed:

The darkness and depression of winter cannot be better appreciated than in the Yukon. For nearly six months the sun is below the horizon. It is what is called the "Polar Winter."

Is this not depressing? They say that in those places where there is a Polar Winter, the frequency of serious depression, alcohol and drug abuse is major concern.

Advent and Christmas utilize the symbolism of light shining in darkness to teach what the Lord says concerning the enlightenment of souls with faith and the hope of salvation. Christians have applied the significance of light shining in darkness to many beautiful customs. We enjoy the Advent Wreath with the lighting of candles each week of Advent as Christmas draws near. Our Christmas tree the origin of which began among the Lutherans in Germany and became popular here in America with migration of German Lutherans to our land.

As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, the joyous celebration of the Lord's advent into this world to redeem mankind, we look at the symbolism of light that teaches about Jesus, the true Light, and recall an Old Testament prophecy that used a special light to begin the fulfillment of one of Isaiah's prophecies: The Star. I. The Light enlightened men to salvation; and II. The Star led men to the Light.

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 From the time of the Fall into Sin when God revealed the promise of a Savior who would come as the Descendant of Eve, up to appointed time of Jesus' birth, there were two great periods of time: The age of the Patriarchs, and the age of the Jewish nation.

The first great age in history relied on only two great Gospel Promises. One was given the Church through Adam: ***I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*** Ge 3:15 That's all that Adam and his faithful descendants had for their sermon texts. But that promise enlightened them and all who heard and believed to the grace of God that moved him to become fully human in order to undo what Satan had done.

Then, soon after the Flood in Noah's day reduced the world's population to 8 souls, the Lord introduced another Gospel Promise. He told Abraham: ***I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*** Ge 12 The Light of salvation had now been entrusted to one man who would be the father of a nation especially created to be the source of that Light of Life. For the next 500 years, saving faith was created by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all who heard and believed these two promises of God, that the Promised Descendant of Adam and Eve would be the blessing of all mankind and that this Savior would come into this world through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose name would be changed to Israel.

But then God set apart a block of time, a 1500-year period of time, from the time Abraham's nation of Israel was led out of slavery in Egypt to the time of Jesus' birth. This 1500-year block of time was full of symbols that the Lord Himself set up for the nation of Israel, to set them apart from all the other nations of the world as the nation from which the world's Savior would come. God gave them an enormous weight of Ceremonial Laws that they were to follow in order to learn about the Savior and to be enlightened to prepare for His coming.

Yet, through all these 1500 years of ceremony and religious symbolism, the majority of Israelites lost sight of the Gospel promise. Without the Gospel, there was no light. For that is how the Holy Spirit works light: through the Gospel promise of God's forgiveness of sins through the coming Savior.

The parallel to this sad history is like so many people today who get all charged up emotionally with the

sights and sounds of Christmas while having no thought of the reason why we celebrate the birth of Jesus. They might try to spread a human form of love and peace, try to spread it around under the symbolism of Christmas. But without being enlightened by the Light that is Christ, there is no peace where it is most important: peace with God.

The Scripture from Isaiah the prophet that serves as today's sermon text reveals a conversation between God the Father and God the Son: ***And now the LORD says-- he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength-- he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.*** This is Jesus whom the Lord formed in the womb of the virgin Mary, and who was sent into the world according to those Old Testament promises handed down from Adam, through Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and then through the prophets from Moses to Isaiah and all the others. This is Jesus who would accomplish this salvation at that point God had selected in time when from the cross the Son of God would declare: IT IS FINISHED! This is Jesus who would turn to that erring Jew handing next to him and declare: I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise! And while the Lord would call, gather, enlighten and sanctify those ancient believers through faith in these promises, there were the non-Jews, the Gentiles to whom the Light would be sent.

Hence, the symbolism of THE STAR.

Old Testament History is the story of God's manipulation of history in order to accomplish His purpose setting aside that nation from which the Savior would come. While it amazes us, it was no big deal, according the Lord's conversation with the Lord Jesus: ***It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth...***

Fifteen centuries before Jesus was born, Moses recorded a prophecy uttered by an unbeliever named Balaam: ***I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.*** Nu 24 Somehow that ancient prophecy got into the hands of some wise men living far to the east, and one day these scholars observed a strange astronomical phenomenon which was low enough in the sky to lead them toward Jerusalem. Believing this to be that "star of Jacob" and the sign of God's anointed King, they went to Herod's palace and asked him: ***Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.*** Mt 2:2 The star did not make believers out of them. They already had been enlightened and were believers from having heard the Gospel and for studying the Scriptures. The star only led them to the object of their faith: Baby Jesus, the King of the Jews.

What has led you to Jesus? Were they your parents who brought you to Jesus? Was it a friend? Was it a neighbor, or your spouse? What was the "star" God used to bring you to the Gospel? Whatever it was or whoever it was might be very special to you. But whatever it was or whoever it was is not the Light that enlightened you. That LIGHT is the Gospel that you heard and believed that shines in your heart, enlightening you to know that your sins are paid for and forgiven by the blood of Jesus who died and rose again for your justification.

Woody Allen once said: "I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens." Well, he was there when it happened this past year, and now, based upon his confession of no faith, he is in hell. We are living in a day and age much like the most distressing times in the history of the Church. It's very important never to forget this truth. It is the Gospel in Word and Sacrament that enlightens and keeps us in the one true faith, just as it was the Gospel Promise that kept Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob in the saving faith. It is the Gospel that is preached again and again. It is the water of Holy Baptism, and the bread and wine consecrated by our Lord's own word and power to be for us a meal of forgiveness and salvation.

You are God's people who elevate to the highest priority in your life, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, knowing that these are the means by which our Lord makes the Light of Jesus shine in our hearts. May we also be those "stars" who lead others to Jesus, the Light of Life. Amen.