

Sermon
Epiphany—January 27, 2008
The Very Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear? *
the LORD is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?
One thing have I asked of the LORD;
one thing I seek; *
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days
of my life. +AMEN.

The words of Psalm 27, appointed for today, point us back to the One who gives us strength and hope in the midst of all of life's challenges, in the midst of both life and death. They are words that I have called upon many times and words that I hope you are familiar with as well. They are words that give us both strength and courage to not only be, but to move forward in our faith as well. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?"

Epiphany, the season of the Church Year from January 6th to Ash Wednesday, is the season of light. This is the period of time in which we pay particular attention to the imagery, the metaphor, and the theology that Jesus Christ is indeed the light of the world. And as Christians when we read back into the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, we see in the prophet's words the prophetic proclamation of the One who is to come as light: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*

My parents are the children of first and second generation immigrants from Germany, Switzerland, and Ireland. I grew up being told that I was 50% German, 25% Swiss, and 25% Irish. They grew up in very poor households and worked themselves out of poverty into a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. At age 14, my father sold day-old bread and pretzels on the streets of New York for a nickel. During the first seven years of my childhood we lived in a four-story walk-up apartment in Ozone Park, Queens, several miles outside of New York City. We did not have a lot, however it seemed like plenty to me.

As a little boy, walking up those flights of stairs by myself was very scary, because there was a dark place under each stairwell where I was sure some monster or bad man lurked waiting to grab me. I was very afraid of those dark places and often had bad dreams about them. Ironically, in the 1960's it was totally safe to play as little children on those streets—those were not dark places. As children we have all had those dark places, and as we mature into adulthood we continue to face dark moments and places in our lives.

The appointed Gospel for today begins with the arrest of John the Baptist, the cousin of and forerunner in the ministry of Jesus. This was certainly a dark moment for Jesus, and we hear that he withdrew from Nazareth to Galilee and “made his home in Capernaum by the Sea.” Matthew writes that this is to fulfill as well the words of the prophet Isaiah. It was so important for this gospel writer to link the ministry of Jesus with what had gone before and was recorded in the Jewish scripture. Jesus is proclaimed as the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures.

What's more is that now as a people following Jesus, light has shined upon them and they are asked to repent—to literally turn their lives from the darkness toward the light of God in Jesus Christ. And Jesus goes forth to call the 12 apostles.

A challenge that we all face is how as Christians we live our lives as if the light has shined upon us as well, because it has. What can you do to bring the light of Christ to the dark places of your personal life and the dark places of the lives of others in this community, nation, and the world? But you have to begin with your dark places, they may even be secret dark places, but if they go unchallenged, un-repented, you will not be able to effectively carry the light of Christ to others.

I do not think that it is coincidental that this gospel story flows from the image of light, to the requirement of repentance, to the call to follow Jesus and be bearers of that light. So imagine now walking up those apartment stairs with me, but this time we are not afraid because the dark underneath places are fully illuminated with the light of Jesus Christ. So now as we continue up we can instead have conversation about how we can bring that light to others. And instead of bad dreams we have this as our dream.

+AMEN.