Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Epiphany 0B
Peace, Seattle
January 4, 2015
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

SHINING LIGHT INTO DARKNESS

When Jazz pianist Dave Brubeck arrived at the hospital where his wife Iola had been taken in labor, he learned she'd just given birth to their sixth child—Charles Matthew.

Later that day at the 13th Street Recording Studio in New York City (yep, those where the days when fathers didn't hang around maternity units very long), **he told his band the good news, then went directly to the piano and started to play.**

Light, quick notes rising up a scale announced the new birth and the saxophone, bass and drums responded with exuberant joy. The song was inspired and recorded on the spot. It's name: "Charles Matthew Hallelujah"

When she first heard the piece, Iola Brubeck said it sounded as if each band member was presenting her newborn with a gift. Paul Desmond on sax, Eugene Wright on bass, Joe Morello on drums—Three Kings of the jazz scene.[1]

God's word in the mouth of Isaiah this morning is no less exuberant.
ARISE – SHINE! FOR YOUR LIGHT HAS COME AND THE GLORY OF THE LORD HAS RISEN UPON YOU!
NATIONS SHALL COME TO YOUR LIGHT, AND KINGS TO THE BRIGHTNESS OF YOUR DAWN!

This glorious light that SHINES, says Isaiah, will serve both as a beacon to guide exiled sons and daughters home, and as a gravitational vortex to summon innumerable gifts and abundant offerings—all in the service of proclaiming God's praise.

When God's glory descends on God's people, they too become beacons of light; cities on the hill, bright lamps which can't be hidden. And when that happens, says the prophet, relationships with neighbors and nations will be transformed.

What if, as we begin this New Year, we were to set our stake in the ground and say that 2015 is going to be all about us, this congregation, being light-bringers?

What if in every situation, every interaction, every opportunity set before us, we seize on that calling of showing and sharing and shining light in the darkness?

What if, instead of looking to some one else, some where else to shine light on the contentious and complicated and conflicted situations that bedevil the world we live in, we claimed the role of light-bringers as our God-given vocation?!

What might 2015 look like, if, instead of waiting for our music to be perfectly annotated and orchestrated before we played it—what if instead we took a shot at improvising, playing off each other's joy like the Dave Brubeck Quartet—what then?

[1] Story told by Andrew Nagy-Benson in *Feasting on the Word. Year B: Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) p. 194. Dave Brubeck, *Dave Brubeck Time Signatures: A Career Retrospective* (Sony Music Entertainment CAK 66047; compast disc, 1992). S

Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

When God—the source of all light—says STAND UP AND SHINE YOUR LIGHT HAS COME, it's a cue that something powerful is being unleashed in the world, and we dear sisters and brothers, we get to be part of it.

Welcome to the season of EPIPHANY—the season of SHINING. To kick it all off, Matthew adds this story of those ancient, mysterious Astrologers, THE MAGI following a STAR in their search for God-With-Us.

The magnitude of the event they saw unfolding in the night sky sent them on a seeker's journey and in the weeks ahead we'll see how the light of that STAR becomes internalized in the one who St. John calls the Light of the World.

- We'll see the Light refracted in Jordan's waters at Jesus' baptism.
- We'll see the Light manifested as Jesus calls new disciples on a pilgrim's journey.
- We'll see the Light stretch beyond traditional boundaries of race, class, and gender to touch and heal and transform.

As we move through this season, we will learn that this man Jesus is more than a prophet or miracle worker or holy man. He is God in the flesh; God on earth, who invites us on a journey of hope and shows us the path through the darkness of our time.

But before we go there, we have to make it past HEROD. For the story of the STAR, the story of the mysterious MAGI, is also the story of cruel, paranoid HEROD.

He's the heavy in this story; the guy from the dark side who does his maniacal best to snuff out the new light that's come into the world in Jesus.

Herod stands as a sober reminder to us all that bringing light to a world curved in on itself comes with enormous risks; that corrupt powers always have and always will resist the coming of the Light with all their being.

So we, too, as we follow our Lord and stake our claim as light bringers in this new year, need to be perfectly aware of the fact that wherever and however we may seek to shine, resistance to the light is sure to be close at hand.

When we find ourselves feeling that resistance, experiencing that push-back, we may need to be reminded of other witnesses and servants of the light, who stood in the gap and pushed back darkness.

Raoul Wallenberg **was one of them.** A Swedish diplomat who served in Nazi-occupied Hungary, Wallenberg led an extensive mission to save the lives of nearly 100,000 Hungarian Jews. Chris and I are privileged to know one whom he saved, a woman who years after surviving the Holocaust became a beloved friend. Her name is Erika Leon and she tells the story of her own salvation at the hands of Wallenberg in her self-published biography.

As a Jew in Nazi-occupied Budapest, Erika was forced to wear a yellow star. Every day she watched as neighbors, friends, and fellow Jews were killed outright or loaded onto trucks and trains destined for death. Many times, on clear nights, she found herself staring up into the night sky wondering if it would be her last time to behold the stars. Several times during those dark years her life seemed destined to end, but each time, she found herself miraculously spared.

Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

One of those times came in November of 1944. She, along with others, had been forced on a long march to an old brick factory in Obuda where the pass meant to ensure her safety was taken from her and torn up, and she had been assigned to another group for the next day's march.

In her own words, she tells what happened next:

> Suddenly a Nazi appeared with rifle in hand telling us that who ever had a real Swedish passport could report to him, but those who had fake ones would be shot. Although I had nothing, I reported without hesitation…My legs ached so painfully I couldn't bear anymore. I knew I couldn't survive a march. If he killed me, let him do it.
>
> He led me a long way through several buildings in the factory. A long line of people stood in front of a small house. He pointed his gun at me and told me to wait there. I stood there, enjoying the fresh air, watching the stars appear in the sky. Once more in my life I could see them…
> As the line moved forward, I always moved behind the newcomers, remembering that "whoever wins time wins life." Maybe…
>
> I was the last to go in and when I gave my maiden name to the civilian at the desk he searched a big book then slammed it shut and shouted to the Nazi standing [next to him] there:
>
> **"This list is secret, nobody is permitted to look."**
>
> I thought the world was ending for me, I could not believe that he had found [my] same name there [in his book]. But he [told me], "Okay, you can go." It was a miracle…
>
> Many years later while learning Italian in the Italian Cultural Institute, I found a magazine containing an article about the wonderful Swedish humanitarian, Raoul Wallenberg.
> [It was he] who had saved my life [that day when he] said, "Okay, you can go."

Some 58 years later, Chris and I had occasion to host Erika and her husband Bob in our home in LaCenter, Washington. Having them with us in our home was like having angels among us, for in spite of all that both of them had endured, (and there's much, much more to their story) they were beacons shining forth through extraordinary lives.

On one of the nights they stayed with us the skies cleared. Since it was getting late, Bob headed for bed; but Erika jumped at the chance to go star gazing and perhaps catch sight of a comet that had been leaving its trail across the night sky.

So the three of us, Erika, Chris and I, drove up onto the plateau above town, and when we reached open fields with an unobscured view, we parked the car, sat on the hood and turned our eyes to the star-filled sky.

Erika didn't say much. None of us did. We didn't need to. This courageous survivor, who time and again in war ravaged Budapest had wondered if that night's stars would be her last, took it all in; and us with her. Here was a woman who, because she had been so close to death, had learned how to live, and had never forgotten the lesson.

Gazing at the sky with Erika that night was one of the profound moments of my life.

Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Who are the light bearers in your life? Your "GO TO" people? Your Wallenberg's; your Erika's? Two weeks from today we'll be celebrating the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He, too, is one of those light carriers for me. We each have our own.

This season, this year, let's celebrate these light bearers; share their stories, and so encourage and build upon our own desire to be, with them, light bringers.

And let our witness begin here, that this Table this morning. Where Christ meets us with light by which to travel; with bread for the journey.

Let us pray.
Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, you have come to shine your light on our shadow dominated world, and to show us the way. Give us the will and the wherewithal to walk in your light; and by the power of your Spirit, make us light bringers, too—and not shy ones, but bold; trusting in your promise that you walk before us and beside us, and have made your home within us. Amen.