

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

Epiphany – 3rd January 2020

EPHESIANS 3:1-12

JOURNEY INTO THE LIGHT

In 1875, less than 40 years after South Australia was first settled, two Lutheran missionaries from the Hermannsburg Mission Society in Germany arrived in Adelaide. They had been sent out from Germany to start a mission among the Indigenous people of Central Australia. They didn't speak much English, let alone any Indigenous languages, and had no idea about the conditions which awaited them in their mission field. But after a few months preparation they set off north on a long journey into the wilds of Australia's interior. When they got there, they had to learn the language of the local people, withstand the hostility of local station owners who wanted to exterminate the Indigenous people so they could have the land for their cattle, and these missionaries had to simply survive in the harshness of the Australian outback which was so different to their native Germany. Not only did they survive, but by the grace of God they established a mission which grew into a Church which is still proclaiming God's love in that part of the world today. Why did they do it? Because they felt called to take this message out, and they believed it was the most important message which anybody, anywhere in the world, speaking any language, could ever need to hear.

Just under two thousand years earlier some other people set out on a journey of faith. The conditions were also harsh, and so the journey was probably also undertaken by camel. They were students of prophecies and of the stars, and they had seen a star from the east which made them believe that a new king, one prophesied from of old, had been born. They were also making a journey into the light. When they found the child who had been promised, what was their response? They worshipped Him and gave Him the gifts they had brought. On returning home they took the news of this new, promised, Saviour and King back to their homeland. Their story is significant because it showed that no longer was the news of God's love and forgiveness just for the people of Israel; through Jesus it has come for all people, and the wise men are the first to take that message out to the wider world.

Stories of journeys into the light, and of taking that light out to others. Stories of people who know the grace of God in their lives and now go to great lengths to share it. The list of people like this is endless, and in this reading from Ephesians Paul gives us his story also. He writes about how he is a prisoner for Christ, and about how through the Holy Spirit God revealed His plan to Paul; a plan which was a mystery but now is shown to all people everywhere. And then Paul goes

on to write ‘⁷God treated me with kindness. His power worked in me, and it became my job to spread the good news. ⁸I am the least important of all God's people. But God was kind and chose me to tell the Gentiles that because of Christ there are blessings that cannot be measured. ⁹God, who created everything, wanted me to help everyone understand the mysterious plan that had always been hidden in his mind. ¹⁰Then God would use the church to show the powers and authorities in the spiritual world that he has many different kinds of wisdom.’ *Ephesians 3:7-10 CEV*

The story of Paul is one of the great ‘turn around’ stories of all time. Elsewhere Paul has talked about the role he’d played in actively persecuting and seeking to wipe out the church. He is amazed that despite this God not only showed him kindness, but also brought him to faith and then chose him, Paul, of all people, to be a bearer of God’s message of love and forgiveness to people who hadn’t heard it before! What a story! No wonder Paul just wanted to take it out to others! And have a look at the words and language he uses here; there’s no boasting, Paul knows he owes everything to God’s kindness and grace. His is a testimony about God, not about Himself. And it’s the greatness of this kindness and grace which he now wants to take out to others.

Epiphany, it’s about shining. It’s about stories of people being drawn to the light of God’s love, and then, experiencing this love in their lives, wanting to take it out to everyone they can. The basic message which those Hermannsburg missionaries, the wise men, and Paul all carried out is the same; Jesus came for all people, to bring light into the darkness of people’s lives, to bring forgiveness for our guilt, to heal the relationship between us and God. The message of light, of love, of forgiveness. The message which shines out in these stories of mission, and which continues to shine today.

That’s their stories, what are ours? We each have one. Are they all the same? No. They may cross over in some areas, but for each one of us the story of our relationship with God and of the way His love and grace has worked in our lives is a bit different. That’s why it is *our* story. Part of my story is that I was baptised at that Hermannsburg mission in central Australia. In fact, if it wasn’t for those early German missionaries I probably wouldn’t even be here, because that’s where my parents met. My story involves being baptised as a baby, growing up going to church every week, and becoming a pastor. Some of your stories are similar, but none are exactly the same. For some of you, your stories of how you have known God’s grace in your lives are very different to mine, and that’s fine.

What’s important is that each one of us has been drawn into God’s light by the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us his story here so we can appreciate how great God’s love and forgiveness are, and that they are really there for all of us. His story explains why he was willing to suffer so much, even

imprisonment and eventually death, so that more people could know this news. As one who had experienced the power and grace of God in his life, he now wants to carry it out to others. For each one of us, no matter what our story is, it's also a story about how God has called us to faith in Him, and about how His grace and forgiveness are at work in our lives.

Carry the love of God out to others, because it's there for everyone.

One of my favourite animals are camels, and they certainly featured in the story of the Hermannsburg missionaries, and probably also were used by the wise men, as they are in our portrayals of the Christmas story. They are beasts of burden, good for carrying things. In many ways they are beautiful; practical, well suited to life in harsh conditions, which is why they are thriving in the wild in Central Australia. In other ways they are quite ungainly looking and ugly, especially when compared to the beauty of something like a horse. They also have a reputation for being temperamental, wanting to go their own way, and not always getting on with others. You don't always have the most comfortable journey on them either.

Mmm, maybe a camel is a good picture of the Christians, us, whom God uses to carry His message out into the world. We can and do carry this message out, and through Christians this message continues to grow today. But sometimes we don't do it perfectly, we think we know a better way. Sometimes we fight with our fellow message carriers about how it should be done; even Paul and Peter disagreed. But still God works through us, through our stories, because the message we carry is not our own, but one given to us by God, and we are mere instruments of the Holy Spirit as we take it out. We might not be the most attractive carriers of the message, but by God's grace carriers of this message of light is what we are.

And just as the story for each one of us is different, so too the way we carry it out is also different. It could be in up front telling it out, but it doesn't have to be. The message can shine through us in various ways. It might be in the way we are willing to help others. It could be when we are willing to forgive and move on instead of holding a grudge. Maybe it's in being there for someone at the right time. It could be in the way live our lives; the things we say 'no' to, the things we say 'yes' to. Perhaps it's how we treat colleagues, neighbours, even that person who cuts us off in our car. As Christians, God gives each one of us the opportunity to take the message of our faith out, to let others know that this message is there for everyone, there's no distinction. We might feel that as messengers we are sometimes ungainly and even ugly in how we operate, but God still works through us.

The light of God's love shining out for all people. That's the message of Epiphany, the message of Paul, the wise men, and countless missionaries throughout the ages, and the message

and call for us in our lives today. Just over a week ago at Christmas we celebrated with joy that God came into the world as a human being to save all people. Now we are reminded that it's to this light of love and forgiveness we are drawn, and it's the story of why this light is so important in our lives that we are called to take out. God's love, God's grace, God's peace, God's forgiveness, God's power: God's light, shine in and through us each day. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION:

Journey Into The Light

The journey for each one of us into the light of God's love is slightly different; while some peoples' faith journey may be similar, no two are exactly the same. Reflect on your journey, both where you have come from and where you are now:

- Who were the 'missionaries' God used to help you to come to and grow in His love?
- Has your journey been straightforward, or had a number of deviations? How has God kept you close to Him?
- Are there things you do to stay strong and focused in your faith when you feel you are drifting away from God?

Sent Out With God's Message

Like the wise men, Paul, and countless other missionaries, we are all sent out with God's message, to take it out in our lives each day.

- Reflect on the situations God has placed you in, the people He has put you in contact with, so that you can share His message?
- How has God equipped you to be a messenger for Him? What gifts has He given you?
- In what ways are you comfortable in sharing this message? In words, actions, through relationships?

The Light of Love and Peace

- Thank God that the light of His love and peace is now here for all people, and that we too have been drawn into this light.
- Pray that God will help you to live as who He has made you to be, and that by that you will be a sure witness to Him.

Pastor Andrew R. Koehler

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