

A sermon for the 5th Sunday after Epiphany

“The light shines in the darkness.” The church is a mouth house.

In this season of Epiphany we celebrate the coming of the light. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

God is hidden in light inaccessible, as Isaiah states: “Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself” (Isa 45:15). God is hidden because he actively hides himself. He *means* to be hidden. He out of reach to our senses. We cannot see God in other people. We cannot see God as we see each other. There is a distance between God and ourselves that cannot be bridged from our side.

The natural world around us is a place of majestic beauty but also strife, conflict, and violence, as the poet Tennyson wrote: “Nature, red in tooth and claw.” Thus we cannot look through nature and see God above. Evil blocks the way.

The human race, too, is red in tooth and claw. Someone has said that the only proof for the existence of God is the Jews, who for 4,000 years have survived in spite of all the horrible things done to them.

We cannot penetrate the hiddenness of human events. We see through a glass darkly. We don’t even have a basis for making an absolute separation between good and evil. Many things we think are good turn out to be evil in the end and *vice versa*.

The church, properly speaking, like her Lord, is also hidden, but not invisible. It is hidden because you cannot point to any institutional church and announce there is the true church. In this world visible, institutional churches are always both good and bad. There never was a pure church back at the beginning. Heresies cropped up in the first century. In the Middle Ages the church was a den of debauchery and superstition. Those who study church history know darkness and evil has shadowed the church from the beginning. It is said that God writes straight with crooked lines. This is true, not just for our lives, but for the church throughout history.

Luther famously said: “Where God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel.” As Melancthon wrote: “The church is hidden under a crowd of wicked men.”¹ And: “Though wolves and ungodly teachers run rampant in the church, they are not, properly speaking, the kingdom of Christ.”²

For Luther the church, properly speaking, is not bound to time, place, nor persons, and thus not to Rome, Geneva, Wittenberg, or Canterbury, Chicago, or St. Louis. The church is not a legal institution. Rather, it is a spiritual assembly of believers across time and place.

Luther’s conflict with Rome drove him to rediscover the church scattered around the world. As he said, Christ lives and rules in India and the Orient, as well as in Greece. The church, properly speaking, is not any particular physical assembly but rather a spiritual one. John 19:36: Jesus says: “My kingdom is not of this world.” This indicates that the church is not bound to time and place, but is found wherever there is faith in him.

¹ Apology VII and VIII, *Book of Concord* Tappert 171.19; Kolb/Wengert 177.19.

² Apology VII and VIII, *BC* Tappert 172.22; Kolb/Wengert 177.22.

The marks of the church, properly speaking, are not its officials, its leaders, or its headquarters. Rather, the marks of the church are baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the gospel, for where they are present there are **God's own people**. The church, though hidden, is revealed wherever you find baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the gospel.

1 Peter 2:9: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, **God's own people**, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness **into his marvelous light.**"

We are called out of the darkness in baptism. Through baptism we are **adopted** into God's own people. Through baptism the believer participates in the death and resurrection of Christ. Through baptism the believer is taken from the kingdom of darkness and placed into the kingdom of light. Through baptism the believer is given the Holy Spirit. Baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21). As Paul writes, God sent his Son so that we might receive **adoption** as sons and daughters, and if sons and daughters, then fellow heirs with Christ (Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8:15-16). In the church we are all **adopted children** of God, fellow heirs with Christ of his kingdom to come.

Paul writes that the church as the body of Christ. The church is **not like** a body; the church **is** a body.

"For just as the body is one and has many members, so it is with Christ....If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose....As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor 12:12-21).

Like the human body, the church is a body in which all the parts matter. A pastor once visited a fellow who had gradually dropped out of church. And as they sat in the fellow's living room by the fire and talked, the pastor took the poker and separated out some embers, which gradually grew cold. Like those separated embers, when we are separated from other Christians, we grow cold. We need other believers to carry us in faith. And others need us to carry them in faith. We need the nudge and the togetherness of hearing the word and receiving the sacraments.

The church is a body organized for different functions and all working for a common goal. Some are the feet that get us places. Some are the ears that listen. Some are the arms that lift and move and get things done. Some are the backs that carry the load. Many are the hands that carry others in prayer. All are the ears that listen for the gospel. As Paul writes: "How will they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? (Rom 10:14)

It is all about the speaking and the hearing. Faith comes by hearing (Rom 10:17). The gospel brings the **light**. "In him was **life** and the life was the **light** of men" (John 1:5).

Luther put it this way: The church is a **mouth house** and not a book house. What the church has to offer is not ancient history. Rather, it is the living voice of Christ himself. He who died and rose again is living now and comes to us in his Word and sacraments to claim us for his kingdom to come.

The church is a mouth house because the gospel is not what you find in the book; rather, the gospel is a living voice of the living Lord. The church is a gathering to announce good news, the lordship of Christ, his victory over sin and death, to baptize in his name, sing of his glory, distribute his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, partaking in his Supper now, as a foretaste of the feast to come. As Paul writes:

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the **body** of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16). And: “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:5).

The church is a mouth house and the message it announces is specific: “What we preach is **not ourselves**, but **Jesus Christ as Lord**, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5).

To get it done, to function properly and do its job, the church chooses individuals to be the public ministers, the public speakers of the Word.

About a hundred years ago a young farmer out in his field saw a cloud formation shaped like the letters “PC” – which he read as a sign from heaven – “Preach Christ.” His sold his farm, sold his equipment and off to the mission field in China he went. He was a sincere Christian but he was inept and had to be shuffled from place to place. Back home his uncle just shook his head and said: “I told him the “PC” meant “Plant Corn.” He had been a good farmer; he should have stayed where he was.

Another young man, a college student, mulling over future options, made an appointment with the campus pastor to talk about the ministry. The student was worried because he had never had a conversion experience, a personal miracle, to which he could point to verify that he was “called” to the ministry. The campus pastor told him that a call to ministry is not about signs and miracles; rather, he said: “There are two questions to ask: 1) Do you have the right skill set? and 3) Does the church have a need for more preachers?”

In 1521 Martin Luther was called before the Emperor and took his famous stand: “Here I stand, I can do no other.” To save him, his friends whisked him away and hid him in the Wartburg Castle for 10 months. In 1522 returned to Wittenberg to preach and give direction for the Reformation. He preached eight days in a row. His first sermon began this way:

“The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another’s ears, but everyone must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me. Therefore, everyone must himself know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian. And these are what you, my beloved, have heard from me many days ago.”

Luther lived in troubled times. The foundations of the established church were crumbling. People were looking for direction. What is the church for? Which should we do? C. S. Lewis said that the devil works harder in the church because he owns all the rest. The devil works hard in the church to get its leaders off track, to confuse and confound the church’s mission. And the fact that church history is such a crooked tale shows the power of the darkness as it contends with the light.

The Lord has called us out of the darkness into his marvelous light. In baptism the Lord claims us and adopts us into his own people. In the Lord's Supper he forgives our sin and gives us a future in his kingdom.

The church is a mouth house. "What we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord." To be sure, we extend calls to pastors to preach publicly. It is equally true that this Word is for each of us as we fight our own battle with death and evil and as we care for others. What is it to preach Jesus Christ as Lord? In a nutshell it is these ten words: God in Christ died and rose for you and me. Stop, no additions.

No gospel-plus. No added works, or proper feelings, or mystical experiences. Just these 10 words and no other: God in Christ died and rose for you and me.

God works in his mysterious way his wonders to perform. Outside of the gospel, God hidden in inaccessible light. He is revealed where he wants to be known, in the cross and resurrection. Christ lives now and comes to us in his Word and sacraments – through ordinary speaking and hearing, in ordinary water, bread, and wine. And he works salvation through his broken, fallible church; he works through you and me, ordinary men and women, lost and helpless as we are, his wonders to proclaim.