

Your Light Has Come

Isaiah 60:1-6

Epiphany

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Sunday, January 6, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

In the times of the prophet Isaiah, the foreign powers of Assyria, then Babylon, were a constant threat to Judah, and too often carried her best and brightest far off into foreign lands. Much of the prophet's writings are both an admonition to God's people to return to the Lord's ways so they might experience his favor again, as well as an encouragement that the time of oppression from foreign powers will not last forever. Isaiah calls the people both to repentance and to hope.

In chapter 60 he gives them good news. Soon God's people are returning home, and all the nations will be drawn into God's light, that shines in and through the people of God. It is a proclamation that is like Gospel to our ears on this Epiphany Sunday.

The word of the Lord:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. (Isaiah 60: 1-6)

Let us pray:

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light; in your truth, find freedom; and in your will, discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

When I hear those words of Isaiah, words of light casting away the darkness, so many Biblical images and sounds come to mind. I think of the first chapter of the Gospel of John, *Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* In Genesis, *Let there be light.*

I remember the Sunday school song, *This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine.* I think of the worship song, *Shine, Jesus, shine Fill this land with the Father's glory.* And you remember that summer camp song you used to sing at the flag pole at 7 a.m? *Rise and shine and give God your glory, glory! Children of the Lord!* Don't blame me if you are humming one of those at work tomorrow morning. They're catchy.

Arise, shine; for your light has come... (verse 1). They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord (verse 6).

It feels good to proclaim the praise to the Lord! It is no mistake it feels so good. God made us for praise. It is in our DNA. Someday they will discover that gene, too--the "praise gene." You heard it here first.

Praising God is our eternal calling, and brings us into his light. Scripture says we can join our voices with those of angels, who round the clock sing praises to our God. *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord, God Almighty; heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the Highest!* Giving God praise brings us into his light. It lifts the weight of the darkness that overshadows us.

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you (verse 2).

When I hear those words, I think of that darkness that hangs over us too much of the time. You know that darkness, don't you? It has so many forms. It is that darkness that puts doubts in your mind that God has goodness in store for you and for your life. It is that darkness that dictates you must go down for others to rise. It is that darkness of the world around your children that conditions them to violence and convinces them that righteousness is only for prudes.

It is that darkness of deceit that dampens the trust you seek to build with coworkers, your neighbors, your friends. It is that darkness of overfilled schedules that saps the life from your marriage or relationship. It is that threat of illness. It is that dark threat of exile from war, which millions of people still live in today, and makes women and children vulnerable to prey, as it did in Isaiah's time. Darkness does cover us, and it surely weighs us down. But Isaiah brings a message of light.

This New Year's Eve some friends of ours accompanied us to the IMAX theatre at the Air and Space Museum out near Dulles Airport. There we saw on an incredibly large screen an amazing film called, *The Alps*. Perhaps you have seen it. The film was set in Switzerland and reminded me of a trip I took there one winter almost twenty years ago.

For so many years I had heard of the beauty of the mountains in that country, but for the first few days of my visit I saw none of them. Dark clouds hung low, and Switzerland did not seem so beautiful to me at all. In fact, it was depressing. After a couple days,

my friends and I decided to take the train to the idyllic town of Interlaken, nestled in the mountains between lakes. Perhaps a change of location would make the difference.

When we finally arrived in Interlaken, the entire town was enveloped in a cold fog. We wandered the streets, wondering why the guide books raved about the sights. Eventually, we happened upon a trail, and with no idea whatsoever where that trail led, we followed it up a hill. We kept walking and walking up that hill. Soon it felt like we were enveloped in a cold sauna, moisture weighing down our clothes. We hiked for a good long time, and our breathing became labored. Finally, within the span of a few steps, there was a moment like nothing I had ever experienced before, when my head, as if surfacing from a body of water, poked up over the clouds through which we had been hiking, and I beheld a vision like nothing else.

All around at eye level was the top surface of a great cloud that hung over the town. And all around above that cloud were peaks set in a vista of the purest blue I had ever witnessed. I could feel the dampness in my toes below, but warm rays now shining on my face. I stood between two worlds. And before my mind could edit the thought, my lips proclaimed, "This is heaven!"

As if God had timed the moment only for me and my friends, we beheld the power of the sun and, over the course of the next hour as we sat eating cheese and crackers, watched that heavy cloud dissipate before our eyes, revealing the town beneath it, filled with church spires and shingled mountain dwellings. The bells were ringing. God was pulling out all the stops!

Sometimes God gives us a vision for hope, in the midst of darkness. He lifts our heads above the clouds, just for a moment, to remind us of his power and beauty on those days when clouds hang low. It is no mistake Jesus liked to pray on mountaintops. Don't you just relish in those reminders—natural, supernatural, or ordinary—that God continues to create and infuse so much good into this world? God gives us those reminders every day, big and small.

When someone takes time out of their day, for no other reasons than goodness, to write you a card that says, "I think you are great. Hang in there!" you give praise to God for their thoughtfulness, because it came at just the right time. When the doctor takes five more minutes to hear you complain about that pain in your knee that she knows she cannot solve with any medicine; it is just because you are older now. But she listens anyway, about so much more than the pain in your knee. Life has been more than you can handle of late, and you catch yourself unloading more than you expected you would unload in that moment. And she keeps listening. Those five minutes remind you that God still has people in this world who care about the person attached to the knee. God lifts your head above the clouds, for just a moment.

Maybe when you are sick or down, someone tells you a small group somewhere in some obscure part of the world is praying for you. People you do not even know nor have ever met, but somehow your name reached them through some odd connection. That news makes the difference because, prior to that moment, you were feeling you were all alone in the world.

Maybe God takes you on a walk or ride somewhere, or out to dinner with friends, and suddenly when you are looking at the view or sitting at that table with the candle in the middle, you take a step back in your mind and say, "Wow. God is good. God has given me so much. The world is bigger than me! God is in charge. Why have I been so troubled?" *Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.* Get your head up over the clouds. The glory of the Lord has been revealed to you in Jesus Christ.

My friends, what of your life is lost, or unredeemable, when you are in Christ Jesus? What enemy, what darkness is greater than God's power to restore, renew or build you up again in a whole new way? What path, with God, leads to dead ends? For if you have been united with Christ in a death like his, won't you be united with him in a resurrection like his? Is there a more powerful darkness than death? Yet Paul writes, "Where, O death, is your sting?"

It is not so much the power of a positive attitude. That is about you and me, and what we can do. No, my friends, it is about the power of God to make all things new. If God can construct the greatest, most beautiful surroundings you have ever experienced, and God through his Son can defeat the enemy of death, what in the world is left to worry about? You are a new creation in Christ. Yes, you have problems. Maybe you have big problems. Maybe they really weigh down on you.

I am not going to promise you that a better attitude and a little more faith on your part is going to make any of that better. I do not believe *your attitude* or *your faith* can dissipate the weight of darkness. But I will promise you this: when you rely, when you lean into *God's attitude* about you, when you lean into the kind of faith that God has in you through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then, my friend, as it says in verse 3, *...nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.*

It is not about you or me. It is about what God can do through you and me, how God can shine through us and through our witness to his glory and power. That is why you just cannot hide it under a bushel. It is not your light to hide. It is God's! It is not just something you *think*; it is something you *live*. It is God's light, shining through you in the darkness. And that is the commanding vision Isaiah gives his people in this passage: *Arise and shine, the Lord has come!*

One of the things I most love about Epiphany Sunday is the way God prods and pokes us believers to take all our talk about him seriously. You see, the great irony about those three wise men coming to visit Jesus, the Light of the world, is that they are outsiders, Gentiles, leaders from the world outside of God's special clan of religious believers. They stand for all those people outside of God's favor. Remember what I said about how Isaiah both comforts and challenges God's people? When the wise men bring gifts it is just that kind of comfort and challenge. It is God's way of telling us, "The Light of the world has come, and all the nations will call him blessed." And indeed his Gospel is still spreading around the world, like a blaze of light! That is the comfort.

But those wise men are also a challenge to those of us on the inside, comfy and cozy in the glow of God's protection. "See," he is saying, "if even these non-believers come from so far to praise, then why can't you lift up your voice in praise to my son?" Isaiah says, *They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord!* And greater are we in adding our voice to

his praise. Arise, shine, your light has come. The glory of the Lord has been revealed.

Let us pray:

Living God, help us to comprehend your holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and, believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ our Lord. Amen.