

Promises and Light
United Church of Broomfield
January 7, 2024

Isaiah 60:1-6

¹Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
²For darkness shall cover the earth
and thick darkness the peoples,
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
³Nations shall come to your light
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
⁴Lift 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 in their nurses' arms.
⁵Then 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.
⁶A 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.

Ephesians 3:1-12

¹This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you gentiles, ²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have access in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

The winter has its benefits, but I struggle when the days become as short as they are. There is simply too much darkness for me. I think that's why I struggle living in Chicago even more. Winters there had far less sunshine – more overcast and grey skies. Then, when snow and ice knock out the electricity and crews struggle in the bad weather to restore it, the lack of light is even more depressing can even be scary. Oh sure, we have flashlights and emergency candles, but the darkness is still close. It's always a big relief when the power comes back on.

Imagine back before electric power or flashlights or even decent candles. When night came, the longer nights of winter, there was only a little dish of oil with a wick floating in it to give a feeble light, at best. Jesus said, We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4). The night was a time for evil rather than good, a time when only people up to no good were about.

That all sounds strange to us because we think we can work or play or do whatever we want 24 hours a day; and to be honest, we do. But then we remember how it was centuries ago -- and how it is for us at those times when the lights flicker and go out. There are many apocalyptic movies depicting the absolute worst should modern society lose the power to light up the night. And with concerns about energy resources and the state of the power grid and winter storms and terrorism, we may wonder how long the power will stay on and what will happen when night falls -- really falls.

"Darkness shall cover the earth," the prophet says, "And thick darkness the peoples." He is not just thinking about the setting of the sun or the onset of winter. It is the night of ignorance and sin, the winter of hopelessness that lies heavily upon the world. That kind of "thick darkness" can't be driven away by daylight or oil lamps or electricity. If things are going badly, life can seem as pointless when the sun has risen as it did during the night.

That darkness the prophet spoke of hadn't always covered the earth. In the creation story of Genesis 1, the first thing that God said was "Let there be light." When God made God's covenant with Israel at Sinai, "the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain" (Ex. 24:17). Israel was to be God's light to the nations. But Israel tried to become like all the other nations. The kingdom of Judah was eventually destroyed, and its leaders were carried off into exile. Even though they were able to return after many years to the ruined city of Jerusalem, they were weak and surrounded by hostile neighbors. Darkness still covered the earth. It seemed to them that the promise that God would restore God's people had been just empty words.

That is the setting of our text from Isaiah. The trustworthiness of God's promise is so strong that the prophet speaks of what is not yet as if it already were. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you." It will be over 500 years before that hope is fulfilled, but because it is a hope grounded upon God, it is a reality. Israel will be the light of the world and the nations, and their rulers will come to the rising of that light. And that is what Epiphany is all about.

The Epiphany story, the account of the coming of the Magi in the Gospel of Matthew, seems ready-made for Christmas pageants and Christmas cards. We've all seen the pictures of the wise and learned astrologers, seated atop their camels, pointing to the star that they're following? Actually, there is no mention of camels in the gospel account, and we have to go to our text from Isaiah to find them. But the camels, and even the gold and frankincense and myrrh, are only props for the story. The real point is that the nations come to the rising of Israel's light, to the infant Jesus.

Christmas and Epiphany, the birth of Christ and the coming of the nations to acknowledge him, have a party-like atmosphere for us. We celebrate them, and we should celebrate them, because they mean our salvation. But remember that Christ didn't come into the world because there was a party going on. He did not come

when everything was wonderful but in the time of our deepest need, when the world was shrouded in thick darkness. He is the light that rose in the darkness, the light that the darkness is not able to overcome. Even the shadow over the earth on Good Friday and the gloom of the grave will not be able to quench that light.

“Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” The Magi are just the first sign of that promise. Jesus’ ministry is carried out among the people of Israel, but his encounters with Gentiles suggest a larger scope of his mission. All of his first disciples are Jewish, but after his resurrection they quickly begin to realize that the message of salvation is meant for everyone. The light of Christ isn’t the exclusive property of any one group of people; it is meant to shine into all the dark corners of the world. He is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Jesus is the one who has lightened our darkness. When we come to the light of Christ and put our trust in him we are able to see things as they really are, and we don’t have to fear imaginary boogymen that lurk in the shadows. Maybe you remember lying in bed at night as a child and seeing some fearsome shape on the wall -- but when the light was turned on it was just the shadow of some familiar object in your room. In our world we hear about a lot of threats to our security and a lot of beguiling promises about what will make us really happy. Look at this bright and shiny object, service, fad or scheme – you want it, you have to have it – “and for the low, low price of \$29.95...” In the brightness of Christ, in the light of our ultimate security and happiness, we can see those things for what they really are. Terrorism is real, murder is real, global warming is real, war, famine and oppression of all kinds are real --- but we don’t have to spend our whole life looking over our shoulder in fear. We can enjoy the things of the world, but we know that “the winners” aren’t those who die with the most toys.

It would be easy to stop there and leave us feeling that we’re people who have the good fortune to live in the light and can feel sorry for those who are stuck in the darkness. But the one who is the light of the world wants us to be more than just passive recipients of his gifts. Isaiah says, “Arise, shine, YOUR light has come.” Your light is the Messiah and is also YOUR light – the light within you! In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples, “You are the light of the world. ... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14,16).

We are the light of the world. Wait, WE are the light of the world? It’s Epiphany – I thought thought Jesus was – the Star of Wonder and all! And of course, he is. But we are the Body of Christ. In our reading from Ephesians, Paul reiterates that the Gentiles are a part of the body and are included in receiving, being and sharing the light of Christ. We are the community of those who have been brought to the light to put our trust in it and to be transformed by it. Paul says that “All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). That is the hope that is given to us by the birth of the Son of God in our world.

Isaiah tells his eternal audience, “lift your eyes...look around...see all who come to you.” You will be radiant. Your heart will swell. You will rejoice. Your light is so amazingly beautiful that it like a magnet that others can’t resist. People are drawn to your light. Everyone one of us IS the light of God. Created BY the light that is God. Guided BY the light that is Jesus. And protected BY the light that is Spirit.

Despite darkness that covers the earth and casts a shadow upon the people, the Lord did, is and will rise upon you! The Lord’s glory will appear over you. You (plural and eternal) will have magnificent light raining down upon you so bright that YOUR brightness will become a beacon for all – for nations, for political leaders, and for the simplest of people everywhere. When you accept the light of the Lord, it amplifies within you and beyond you. And all will see your dazzling brilliance and seek you out, like magi crossing a desert.

The problem, however, is when we don't believe it. When we don't live into it. When we don't accept the light and when we don't share it; the Light is not for our benefit alone. The light that God promised was not an abstraction or a bare idea. It was made flesh in Jesus Christ, and our calling as God's people is to be the means by which that light becomes visible to those who are still in darkness. We do that by speaking the message of Christ and by acting the message of Christ, living lives of concern for others that are patterned after the life of Christ.

We are brought to Christ, we put our trust in him, and we're empowered by the Spirit to bear witness to him. When the light has shined in our darkness we are made able to enlighten others. Let us shine bright.

AMEN