

The Light Has Come

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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Our texts this morning speak of a light shining in the darkness. Epiphany Sunday is about God's light that shines in the darkness. We read about this on Christmas Eve, standing here in candlelight, and the light shines in the darkness as we turn the calendar into 2024. Isaiah 60 describes a darkness that covers the earth, *thick* darkness covering the peoples. This is a darkness that is so deep that you cannot even begin to move. You can't see where you should go. You don't know whether to go forward or whether to back up. The darkness can be so deep that you may not even feel like getting out of bed. Some of you have known this kind of darkness in your own life.

One of the things about biblical faith is that biblical faith is always very realistic. Biblical faith does not shrink from acknowledging that life in our world is shot through with darkness, for all of us. As we are beginning 2024, it would be very possible for each of us to name multiple situations – personal situations, circumstances in our community, national situations, global or environmental situations – that could be understood as falling under Isaiah's term "thick darkness." Situations for which there's no clear path forward.

But according to Isaiah, thick darkness is made entirely bearable. It is not fearsome. It is no longer dreadful. For, the text says, *your light has come*. The glory of the Lord has risen upon you. So, Isaiah tells his listeners, "Arise." That's a word for us today. *Arise*, your light has come.

Now, it is really important for us to observe that the reason the darkness is bearable for Isaiah, the reason Isaiah says to arise, is *not* because Isaiah is really brave. And the reason the darkness is no longer fearsome for Israel is *not* because Israel had enormous reserves of strength in itself, or because they were born into the right family, or because they got the right education, or because they had finally gotten their lives together. No, the reason the darkness is no longer dreadful, according to Isaiah, is because they, and we, live in the midst of, and under the power of, the glory of the Lord. The glory of the Lord has risen upon us.

"Glory" is a word that the Old Testament commonly uses for the light of God. God's glory shines over us, but it typically requires eyes of faith to see the glory of God. The world may look at a situation and see something ordinary, or something

ugly, or something useless. But the church, with eyes of faith, looks at those same situations – situations and people that the world rejects and scorns and tosses to the side – and sees the glory of God shining through, in places you would not expect. Matthew 25 says this where the face of Jesus is seen in the least of these, the hungry, the prisoner, the stranger. 1 Samuel 16 says this when the little shepherd boy David, the runt of his family, turns out to be the chosen King for Israel. And above all, the cross of Jesus teaches us this, where the rejection and execution of Jesus turns out to hold the salvation and the redemption of the world. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, the glory of God shines through people and places that the world does not accept and utterly rejects.

That is the news of Epiphany, and it is at the heart of what makes the gospel *good news*. Epiphany means “the appearance,” and refers to the manifestation of God’s light in Jesus. The light of God comes to us from outside of us. It *gets* inside of you, but it does not *come* from inside of you. Against all of the assumptions of the world’s self-help industry, we are not responsible for generating the light that will lead us into life. For all of us who are so easily inclined to think that the future of the world, or the future of the church, or the future of our own families, is *on us*, is all on our shoulders, this should come as a huge relief. The future is not up to us. The light of God has come to us.

If you read the Isaiah 60 text closely, you will see that light of God encompasses both your life up until now, and your life still to come. “Your light has come. The glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” These refer to the ways that the light of God has already come into your life. Therefore, you can go about your life today in the knowledge and the confidence that you have been given the gift of God’s guiding light. But it is also true that “the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.” These refer to the ways that the light of God still has more gifts to give you, more light to shine on us in the future. This is why, as we move into 2024, we can move with a steady and quiet confidence that God still has gifts yet to give the world. A core assumption of biblical faith is that God is not done with us yet.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has already defeated all the powers of sin and nothingness and meaninglessness and evil, and because God has done that, God calls you and me to Rise, and Shine, and Get to Work. But we must remember that when we “get to work,” we are not doing it under our own steam. Because remember, the light of God does not come from within us. God still has light to give, still has energy to give, still has strength to give us. God does not say, “Well, I’ve already done my part, now the rest is up to you.” All that we do - serving people, helping people, building healthy organizations, developing good administrative processes, working for justice and reconciliation and forgiveness and healing – all

that we do is because the glory of the Lord has risen upon us, and is rising upon us today. So, we arise as well, feeling the wind of God is at our backs.

This is an experience we are each intended to have. We are each intended to feel the *experience* of God's glory shining over us, what it feels like to have God's light showing us the way to go, God's wind blowing at our backs. We are meant to absorb this knowledge that God is at work in us, helping us to find our way, step by step, through every darkness of your life. You are meant to become more and more familiar with God's Light, so that you begin to see your daily life in a new way. Day by day, we come to know that we are never alone, and that though we will face challenges, daily bumps and bruises and difficulties and frustrations and conflicts and losses, we can face all of them with the quiet courage and steady joy of faith. In the words of Isaiah, we are each meant to see, and to be radiant.

Matthew 2's symbol that is used for this 'light that guides' is *the star*. The magi, or the wise men, the text says, observed "his star at its rising," and they followed. The magi did not get to Bethlehem on their own; they did not figure out the future on their own. The star showed them where to go. And even when they observed the star, they still needed to ask other people for help. "Tell us," they said, "where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" We are not on a solitary, isolated journey, all by ourselves. We need each other's help. We need to work together, to address the challenges facing the church and the world, you need to work with others to address the challenges facing your workplace, you need to work with others to address the challenges facing your family. You are not on a solitary, isolated journey, all by yourself. But above all, we need the help and the light and the wind of God. And the news of Epiphany is that God is already at work giving you all the help and all the light and all the wind you will ever need – today and throughout this coming year. To God be all the glory. AMEN.