

Rise and Shine

Preached FCCW January 6, 2019

Text - Isaiah 60:1-6

The prophet Isaiah described a time of “darkness covering the earth and thick darkness over the peoples.” Which raises the question, “What is the difference between darkness and thick darkness?” Can anything be darker than darkness?

On family camping trips when I was a kid, we slept in a big old Army style tent, made of thick canvas that blocked out almost every trace of light. At night the darkness inside the tent was so thick you literally could not see your hand in front of your face. That was thick darkness.

In the morning, our alarm clock was my stepfather, who seemed to take perverse pleasure in bellowing out “Rise and shine!” before throwing open the flaps covering the windows just above the cots where me and my siblings were sleeping. Piercing bright beams of sunlight, amplified in the pitch-black interior of the tent would ‘bout near burn your retinas out, even with your eyes closed.

Isaiah told the Israelites “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Then you shall see and be radiant.” I have to admit, that when we stumbled out of that tent it was more with squinty eyes and grumpy attitudes than anything remotely resembling radiance.

The thick darkness that Isaiah was talking about, though, was not the darkness that falls upon us, as much as a darkness that descends within us. The Israelites who had been kept in captivity in Babylon were being allowed to return to their homes at last. But they were returning to a ruined homeland. What should have been a joyful homecoming was shrouded beneath a whole other layer of darkness within them.

“Arise, shine,” Isaiah declared to these people, “for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Isaiah proclaimed that the light of God would first come to them through the darkness, before it drove the darkness away.

A lot of the time that is just how it works. The light changes us before it changes our circumstances. Often it is the clearing away of the darkness within us that makes possible the dispersal of the darkness around us.

It’s not always easy to face the light, though. It can hurt our eyes and make us want to squint or pull the pillow over our head, the way the light bursting into our tent, as kids, felt invasive and unwelcome. The light of God carries the promise of hope, but it also demands that we get up

and walk in the light, instead of rolling over and remaining in darkness.

The way we let the light of God shine into the darkness around us is to open the windows of our lives to receive it.

Jesus declared that he was the “Light of the World.” We receive that Light when we worship in Christ’s name. Through worship we experience life focused on God’s presence among us, even in dark times. We are reminded of both; what God offers us and what God expects of us.

When we share in the Lord’s Supper we experience in a unique and tangible form Jesus’ promises of redemption and new life.

We receive the light when we pray, opening ourselves to God in a very intimate way, and waiting to hear God’s word for us.

By the light that we receive, we are transformed so that we become beacons of light to others. Jesus told his disciples that they were to so let their light shine that people would see their good works and give praise to God.

Throughout the Bible, light describes both the glory of God that shines upon God’s people, and the way that the radiance of God’s glory is reflected through those who have been in God’s presence. The Greek word for this radiance is “epiphany.” Epiphany is also a day and a season in which we continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus and how the glory of God shines upon us through God’s Son.

Epiphany has another meaning. To experience an epiphany is to have a sudden breakthrough in understanding, when the stars align themselves in just such a way that we are guided to see something clearly about God, about life, about ourselves, that had been obscured in thick darkness until then.

Epiphany is a season to hear the words of Isaiah in our own lives. As individuals and as a church. “Arise, shine!” God is present to **us**, to deliver **us** from the thick darkness of fear and despair.

But God is also present **through** us, reflecting the light that has come to us through our own darkness, the way the moon reflects the light that comes to it from the sun; so that we become bearers of epiphanies to those around us.

Isaiah told the Israelites that “Nations would come to their light, and kings to the brightness of their dawn.” What would make them so attractive to the peoples outside their borders was not

their own brilliance, but that they would be filled with the light of God's presence.

God's light in us attracts others to the light, as well. Sometimes the light within us shines clearest and brightest when the darkness around us is at its darkest and thickest.

The story of the magi who followed the star to the manger was a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. They were Gentiles, foreigners who nonetheless were drawn from far away by the light that shone into our world through the face of a newborn baby. A baby who came to bring light not only to the Israelites, but to all humankind.

Today's equivalent of the Gentiles would be those who have not had the breakthrough of knowing that God's light has come for them, too. Those who have yet to experience God's life transforming, world transforming love. People found outside, and sometimes inside, the walls of our churches.

Our God is a God who brings light out of darkness. As Christians and as a church, our responsibility is to orient ourselves, so that as much as possible, we are in a position to receive the light of Christ, and to let it shine through us to others who need to receive it, too.

So, in this new year, with all its opportunities and challenges, let us resolve to allow the light of Christ to show us the way to do that, and to be ever more conscious of how we are, or are not, reflecting the light of Jesus for those around us.

Your light has come and the glory of the Lord shines upon **you**. Amen.

Rise and Shine! Lift your eyes and be radiant!