

“Arise and Shine!”

Introduction: Today in the church calendar is the day known as Epiphany. Epiphany is always observed on January 6, after the twelve days of Christmas are over. Epiphany means revelation or manifestation, and it commemorates the revelation of the Christ child to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi.

More broadly, Epiphany reminds us that Christianity is not something human beings have made up but that our faith rests upon God's loving willingness to reveal to us his nature and his ways. In many ways, Christianity is not a faith we try to find; it finds us. We don't climb up to God; God slides down to us. Think, for instance, of all the characters in the birth accounts of Jesus. An angel came to find Zechariah, and then Mary. The Holy Spirit came upon Mary in a life-giving way. A choir of angels came to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem. A star came to the attention of the Magi and then God's ancient word came to lead them in a more specific way. For each of us, as well, we are here, in large measure, because God in some way has gotten our attention; he has come to us and gotten through to us.

It's often argued that because God is so far outside of our human experience, we can't really say anything for sure about him and we are simply arrogant if we do. Certainly, we as human beings have our limits. Of course, God is greater than our human conceptions. But, as one writer observes, “the Christian faith is bold to assert that in Jesus Christ, God has graciously overcome our cognitive limits. . . It is the nature of God not only to be loving, powerful, and righteous, but also to be revealing. It is the nature of God to do epiphany” (Will Willimon). Even more, since every healthy relationship depends upon the parties being willing to reveal themselves to one another, we can be in a relationship with this God because it is in his nature to reveal himself.

This self-revelation of God is what we began to celebrate when we lit our candles on Christmas Eve: God has come to us in Jesus who is the light of life. Now, as Epiphany spreads out before us for the next two months, we want to trace this dawning and gentle but relentlessly growing and persistent light that reaches out and finds us in Jesus. What do we learn about him as he moves out of his manger and begins to mix it up with the world? How does he help us become more aware that we are shined upon people who are called to arise and shine and reflect his glory into the darkness that is in the world?

I. The Dawning of Light in the Darkness

A. To begin, it's helpful to remember on this day of Epiphany that it is in the darkness that God begins to reveal himself. The prophet Isaiah is chocked full of descriptions that describe God's movement and actions with the movement from darkness into light. In this regard, our reading from Isaiah 60 is instructive. The previous chapter sets the context. Although God's people are back home in the land of promise following their exile in Babylon, all is not well:

No one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil. . . So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness but we walk in deep shadows. [59:4, 9]

B. The leaders of Israel, as well as the general populace, are not walking with God but in darkness. Corruption and falsehood and self-interest reign. Though Isaiah is referring to a specific time in the history of Israel, he is also referring us to *every* time. Whenever people in any society expect wisdom from their leaders but get only selfish ambition and deceit, darkness reigns. Whenever people

hope for truth and justice but get only lies and partiality, darkness reigns. Whenever people cry out for food and shelter but get only indifference and empty plates, darkness reigns.

C. As we reflected for a bit on Christmas Eve, we're surrounded by a whole lot of darkness, in our personal, national, and international lives. And yet, gratefully, Isaiah reminds us, it is into the darkness that God comes. Importantly, the light that comes is not the kind of light we get when we plug in the cord and get a Hallmark moment of a Christmas tree lighting up the whole village green, or like when the switches are flipped at Gillette Stadium and the entire field looks like it's the middle of the day! Rather, we get a glimpse of the glory of God as it appears in the face of a baby in a manger, and then becomes brighter as Jesus goes on to live lovingly, die despairingly, rise unexpectedly, ascend majestically, and pour out the Spirit generously. So the coming of this light who is Jesus is more like the light from one candle on Christmas Eve that slowly but surely, and sometimes even imperceptibly, spreads to fill the entire sanctuary.

D. Ultimately, when the earth becomes filled with the glory of God, as Isaiah describes it, the nations and their kings will stream to him, shattered and broken families and communities will be healed, and wealth will be properly and helpfully distributed. Psalm 72 (Call to Worship) puts even more flesh on this light as it anticipates that the royal son who will come and fill the earth with the light of God's glory will be a fair and righteous judge, will defend and uphold the cause of the poor and needy, and will properly receive the tribute of all other kings, as the visit of the Magi and their worship of the Christ child seems to affirm. Understood in this way, Epiphany is not really a sudden insight, as we can sometimes use the word. Instead, it calls us to a journey. As someone has put it, the brightness of the star of Bethlehem did not require the Magi to put on sunglasses. It was an attention catching glimmer providing direction for a journey. What glimmers have you received from Jesus that draw you onward?

II. Called to Shine

A. In this journey, in this filling of the world with the light of Christ, which won't be completed until he returns, Isaiah also hints that in the meantime, we have a role: "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you." We are called to shine because God has shined on us. It's as if we've been lying awake all night in the darkness listening to a storm rage. We've heard the scream of the winds, the pelting of rain, sleet, and snow, and the seemingly endless scraping of the plows. Now, with the morning light, we look anxiously out the window to see what the storm has done. Remarkably, instead of destruction, we get a glimpse of redemption: God's beauty has come and has blanketed our lives with something fresh and new and we are beckoned to get up and go out and see what God wants us to make of it all.

B. Part of that freshness and newness comes from what the babe in the manger would go on to do on the cross. There, he would die our death, paying the penalty for the darkness of our sin, cleansing us and washing us so that we would be whiter than snow (Isa. 1:18; Ps. 51:7). Thus shined upon, the prophet calls us to arise and shine, to journey onward with this Jesus who is the light of life and allow him to lead us out of the various dark areas of our lives so that we might, as Paul writes to the Philippians, "shine like stars in the universe" (Phil. 2:15). This exhortation comes right after Paul highlights the servant love of Jesus, which he calls us to imitate. Perhaps it simply begins, if our leaders are going to fall short, with speaking wisdom, pursuing truth and justice, and providing for the poor and needy. Simple, but essential actions in these days of darkness. The more we can recognize ourselves as shined upon people, the more our lives as individuals, and as a community, will reflect the glory of this amazing God to others. So let us go to the table, where the light of Christ shines most incredibly upon us.