

Sermon on Isaiah 60:1-6  
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*"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-6)*

If you listened carefully to our first lesson today it's not too hard to see why it is the Old Testament reading to accompany the story of the wise men and Epiphany Sunday. **"All from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord."** Sheba would be in Arabia which would be "the east" as far as Israel is concerned. So...visitors from the east bringing gold and incense? Sounds familiar.

And yet, although on the one hand you could say that this was a specific prophecy that was fulfilled in one specific way 2000 years ago by the men who followed the star, it is also at the same time a much bigger prophecy that that has been fulfilled many times over, in fact you yourselves are fulfilling it right now as you sit in these pews today. So today **REJOICE THAT YOU ARE A PART OF GOD'S PLAN**, that this prophecy is fulfilled in you as God has shone that prophesied Light also to you and on you and through you.

This part of Isaiah's prophecy is really directed to the downcast believers in the land of Israel. Why would they be downcast? At the time Isaiah lived Israel (or Judah) was still an independent nation; but things were not going well. The kingdom had fallen far from its former glory of King Solomon a couple of hundred years earlier. It was smaller, poorer, and more vulnerable. Worst of all, as far as the believers in the LORD were concerned, it was plagued with idol worship that even some of the kings had practiced and promoted, polluted with evil practices, as people flaunted disobedience to God's holy law.

The writing was on the wall when it came to Judah's future; in fact, Isaiah had put the writing there himself, so to speak, by prophesying in God's name often that the kingdom would fall and be conquered, before too many years would pass, by the nation of Babylon.

So if you were a true Israelite believer in God, that had to be an incredibly discouraging forecast to face. God's great plan to have a chosen nation of godly people to be a light in a dark world seemed to be going all wrong and the plan falling apart.

So Isaiah here lifts them up to the even more distant future. And he told them that this was not the end, no in fact God had an incredibly bright future for his people--more than they could have imagined:

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"Lift up your eyes and look about you:  
All assemble and come to you..."***

God predicted that one day in the future, in spite of all the bad things going on now, he would shine a bright light from Israel once again. It would be a light that would pierce the darkness that covered humanity in its sin and ignorance; it would shine out into the nations. And it would bring people from those nations to Israel. Like people in a dark cave straining for the light, people would come to Israel from far away. Kings and nations would come, not to attack and plunder, not to invade and conquer, but to bow down and worship the God of Israel.

What a change this would be! In the past, and in Isaiah's day, each nation had its own god or gods. The Moabites had their god, the Canaanites had their gods, the Philistines had their gods, the Israelites had their own God. Of course, they claimed (correctly) that their God was really the only true God of them all, that all the others were fake and imaginary idols. But in practice it didn't seem to be work out that way. At the time of Isaiah almost all the people who worshipped the Israelite God were the Israelites themselves (and tragically a lot of them didn't, either!)

But all of that would change, Isaiah predicted. The light that God would send would shine out from Israel. The nations would leave their false gods and come and worship the true one. They would bring their wealth, their offerings, and even return the captive Israelites that they had taken. Believers and worshippers of the true God would no longer be just from Israel but people from many nations would join that happy gathering.

And of course that was all fulfilled through the coming of Jesus.

The wise men were just the first to fulfill it. They came from a faraway land, bowed down and offered their gifts and worshipped. This was a token of greater things to come--much greater. It was after Easter, in the years that decades that followed, that this change truly began to take place, as the book of Acts describes for us. As the message of Jesus went out into the world it attracted more and more attention from the non-Jews that Paul and others

preached to. The God of the Israelites was always the God over all creation, but after the coming of Jesus the other nations who had been in the dark about him for so long began to worship him.

And of course that includes you and it includes me.

The darkness that covered the earth is the darkness of sin. It's the sad state of natural humanity including you and me--ignorant of God's love and mercy. We had to be taught, we had to be shown the light, we had to be baptized so that the Holy Spirit could do his renewing work.

We needed Jesus the true light. We needed to see God at work in our world--healing the sick, comforting the hurting. We needed to see our own guilt--letting God's commandments smash us with their full force, showing us that all our disobedience and greed and hatred and lust is truly evil and hell-deserving according to God the judge himself--so that we can appreciate how wonderful it is when God declares that he will take all that guilt away, so that we can appreciate what Jesus endured on the cross when we are told that he endures it in our place to spare us all the pain and punishment. That is the light of the truth of the Gospel, the light of Jesus, and by that light we have been saved. And as Isaiah predicted, once we have truly understood this we are glad to worship and glad to bring our gifts and our offerings, our "gold and incense", to God.

Maybe in some ways we feel a little like those believing Israelites did long ago. As I said earlier, it was probably easy for them to get depressed when they looked around at the sorry state of affairs around them. They needed to be reminded of God's great, awesome, wonderful future plans--that none of these temporary problems were going to derail God's great saving plan for the human race.

And I think we need that reminder too.

We look around and may be discouraged by the trends that we see. The percentage of millennials that attend a Christian church is shockingly low when compared to earlier generations at the same age. Every single week,, every Sunday in the United States there are 100 churches that close their doors for good. To even suggest that Biblical morality is a good thing is to be accused of a hate crime--and not just by a few people but by many, maybe most.

It's easy to get discouraged. Isaiah reminds us that we don't need to be. People are still coming to the light. The Gospel is still going out into the world and bearing fruit. We don't always understand why God allows the world to go on the way it does. The important thing for us to remember is that the plans that God has told us are still going on. The light of Jesus is still shining.

But even more than that, rejoice that you are a part of it. You have seen the light of Jesus Christ. You know you are headed for glory. And that's what matters most of all.

And so Isaiah says to you too: Arise and shine! Even if others don't appreciate what you have in Jesus, you can still shine. You can live for him. You can show the world what it means to have a joyful attitude because of the truth you know in Jesus.

And maybe, just maybe, when you are shining your light you can help be the way that someone else comes to see it for the first time. Just as that prophecy has already been fulfilled by your coming to faith in Jesus, maybe it can be fulfilled again by someone else coming to faith through you, to the brightness of the dawn of the Messiah, and your heart can "throb and swell with joy" all over again at the privilege of helping someone else hear and appreciate what it means to be a saved, blood-bought, redeemed, loved child of God through the message of the cross of Jesus.

Don't be discouraged. God made you a part of his plan--a plan to have millions of people praising him in heaven forever. And God's plans never fail. Arise and shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you! Amen.