

*“Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
 and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.  
 2 See, darkness covers the earth  
 and thick darkness is over the peoples,  
 but the LORD rises upon you  
 and his glory appears over you.  
 3 Nations will come to your light,  
 and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
 4 “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.  
 5 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.  
 6 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)*

### **Rise! Shine!**

What did Christmas mean to you this year? Today is the last day of the twelve days of Christmas. So as we depart from the Christmas season, what did you learn? What did you do? What does Christmas make you want to do? Now, I don't mean to insult you. We come to church regularly. We all understand that Christmas isn't about Santa Claus and Rudolf, right? The real meaning of that holiday is the birth of Christ. But what's our take home from that this year? In a way, that's what today is about, because this morning we're jumping the gun by one day and celebrating the next great holiday in the church year: Epiphany. Tomorrow is the festival of Epiphany. In the ancient church, this was a much bigger holiday than Christmas because this holiday celebrates the fact that the Jewish baby who was born in the Jewish town of Bethlehem and who lived all his life according to God's Old Testament Jewish laws was not only the Savior of the Jews. The Son of God came to save us all. We're celebrating this holiday because we have seen the light of Christ. To us who have seen that light, who gathered again this year to remember the child of Bethlehem, to us God says **Rise! Shine!**

#### **I.**

**Rise! Shine! Light has come to the darkness.** God loves that image of light and darkness. He uses it in some very important Bible passages. Through Isaiah, God said, **“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.”** What is the light? First of all, it's Jesus. In the opening verses of John, God called Jesus the true light that was coming into the world. Then he spoke of that light shining in the darkness. And that points us to the second way God uses that image of light – it's the message about Jesus. Then John says, **“The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”** That gives us a third image of light: faith. We are enlightened – we're no longer blind and in darkness. Now we see.

After Isaiah said, **“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.”** He continued, **“See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.”** Thick darkness covers the earth. What does that mean? Is Isaiah talking about how hard life can be? He certainly would've understood that. He lived in an age when probably half of all children didn't live to reach adulthood. He lived in an age when diseases we don't even think about killed people, when farmers worked from sunrise to sunset every day of the year just to scrape by – and if the

weather didn't cooperate, they starved. He lived in an age when powerful enemies attacks harassed Israel and carried people off to slavery or simply killed them in the streets. Isaiah's people knew how much life hurts. Was that what he meant by "darkness covers the earth"?

Not directly. Isaiah was talking about the darkness of sin. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, they plunged God's entire creation into darkness. Every person who has been born since the Garden of Eden was born an unbeliever – except for Jesus. The vast majority of the people on this planet have grown up ignorant of Christ, living for themselves, driven by sin and greed and selfishness. And because of all that sin, life still hurts. We sinners hurt each other. We sinners indulge our selfishness and we're still unhappy afterwards. We sinners live in a broken world so we get sick or we have accidents or we suffer losses through no fault of our own. The root of all those things is sin. Because we are born sinners, we are born in thick darkness, with no knowledge of Christ and what he did to save us, doomed to spend eternity in the darkness of hell.

But the glory of the Lord rises upon you. Upon who? First of all, upon Israel. Until Christ came, the gentile world lived in darkness. Even though the gospel was on full display in Jerusalem every single day, and even though God put Jerusalem right on one of the most important trade routes of the ancient world so that every important ancient people knew about the people of Israel, the vast majority of them paid no attention to the faith of Israel. Thick darkness covered the gentile world until the true Light came. God chose Israel to be the people that would bring the Christ into the world. So for 1500 years they had the light of the gospel in the promises and prophecies of the coming Savior.

But this chapter is talking about how God kept those promises and sent Jesus. That's why God said, "**darkness is over the peoples**" that is the gentiles, "**but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.**" Notice, the LORD himself rises upon Israel. That's who was born in the stable of Bethlehem. That's who preached and taught in their synagogues for three years. That's who died and rose right outside Jerusalem. The LORD himself, the same God who appeared to Moses at the burning bush took on flesh and lived among the people of Israel.

And they saw his glory. But they didn't realize it because it didn't look anything like glory. A carpenter's son becomes a wandering rabbi, but he's the greatest prophet ever. A homeless man, rejected by the great and powerful and welcomed only by prostitutes and sinners is the King. A criminal given the worst punishment the Romans knew how to hand out is the Savior. He wins by dying. He conquers by submitting. He shines and almost nobody sees the light. But Christ came and God's people at last had what no one else in the world had: the true Light who gives light to all people.

Isaiah continues: "**Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.**" This is the point: nations come to the light. The Hebrew word translated as "nations" here is the Hebrew word for "gentiles." Even in the Old Testament, God always planned to bring us to the brightness of his dawn. The coming the kings is not specifically a prophecy of the Wise Men that we heard about in our gospel lesson. They weren't actually kings. But it is a picture of the most powerful people realizing that what they have nothing without Christ. Whole peoples would come to the gospel. Whole nations would come into the light of Christ.

We would come. But we could never have gotten there on our own. To the Jews, God said, "Your light has come." Not, "You have become a light" or "You have lit a light" or "You have found a light." Even for the Jews, God had to come to them, to choose them, to tell them, and Christ had to be born among them. God brought the light to them. And then that light shone and God brought it to us. Only he could do that. Most years when we talk about the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article in catechism class, I ask the kids how they came to be believers. Quite often, one of them will answer, "From our parents." That's true. But it's not the point that I'm trying to make. God uses parents, God uses pastors and teachers, God uses members to spread the light. But the gospel is the light. Only in the gospel can anyone see Christ. We are the light of the world because our work is to share the gospel. We have that privilege because God brought that good news about Jesus to us and gave us faith.

## II.

Now that he has done all that, my friends, **Rise! Shine! People will come to the Light.** The rest of this reading is about what happens when the light of Christ shines. Isaiah says, "**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.**" God calls Israel to look up and see the gentile nations flooding into the Church. This is as a prophecy of the great change that would take place after Jesus ascended. God finally turned to us and began a full scale effort to bring us in. And since it's God's effort, it is overwhelmingly successful. Now that you and I are in the

light, from God's perspective, we are the sons and daughters of Israel. We are now part of the true people of God. Not a physical people, but all those who believe in Jesus. Now we are the ones who are rising and shining and spreading the gospel so that more and more people will come to the light. We are the ones looking around and seeing the wonders that God is doing.

Isaiah says, **“Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy.”** Jesus didn't see much of this attitude during his life on this earth, because joy in the spread of gospel comes from faith in the gospel. Most people didn't believe him. But after Pentecost, when God began to bring in the gentiles, the Jewish Christian Church rejoiced. And that's still what believers feel as God brings in more and more people. All over the world today, God is reaching out with the gospel and flooding the church with souls. We haven't had a good old fashioned mission festival here at Peace in quite a while, but what a joy it is when we can talk to a missionary and hear what God is doing on the other side of the world – or somewhere else in our society. It lifts our spirits to hear of churches growing, of the gospel being shared, of sinners put at rest.

That is happening today. We live in an age when it's easy to feel defeated. Last week, I was appalled when I saw the news report about Colorado making recreational marijuana legal. In my lifetime, I've seen our country's attitudes toward homosexuality shift to the point where it's clear that we've lost this battle. To say what the Bible says is almost a hate crime in America today. The only time you see a Bible believing Christian on TV or in a movie is when they want to mock someone for being judgmental or stupid. Christianity is under siege in America and we all wish the Lord would come back. But even though that's all true, all that Isaiah saw is true, too. One hundred children hear the gospel every day in our school. Two hundred plus Christians gather every week here to hear about Jesus. Every week, I have people in class studying to become members of our church, learning about Christ and his love. And that gospel is being preached at Palabra de Vida, downtown. It's being preached in every nation on earth, even ones that are hostile to the gospel. Men and women all over the world are streaming to the light of Christ.

Why? Because it is the only source of peace in this troubled world. Yes, life here does hurt. Sin has broken this world and it inflicts pain on us every day. But in Christ, we have the promise of a new and better life to come. All too often, our own sin is the cause of our pain. Even if we escape the consequences of our sinful attitudes and actions here, we still have to stand before God's judgment seat when we die or when Christ comes back. But the gospel says that Jesus died and paid for all our sinful and selfish choices, for all our sinful and self-serving attitudes. Jesus paid for it all. That's why he came. He rose and announced that our sin is wiped away and we are holy in God's sight. That's why we will have that new and better life to come. The gospel says that Jesus will always be with us, that he will instruct us through his word, that he will strengthen us when life is hard, that he will work through us so that we can spread that light and he will give us joy in what he is doing. That is the light that draws sinners in.

The rest of the reading is the response of joy of those who hear and believe. They bring the richest offerings imaginable. Isaiah mentions gold and incense – he's talking about the frankincense that we heard about in the gospel lesson. He doesn't mention myrrh, but he does talk over riches beyond compare. When God's people find peace in Christ, they want to show their gratitude and joy. It's not about supporting a budget. It's not about feeling guilty and being beat down to give more. It's about joy in Christ. It's about showing our God our gratitude. And in every generation of believers, this prophecy does come true. God's people bring what he has given them to support his work and to spread the light of Christ.

Arise! Shine! For your light has come! That is God's promise to you. Today we are celebrating Epiphany. For hundreds of years, this was one of the most important festivals of the church year, far more important than Christmas. It was often called “the Gentile Christmas” because this is the day that celebrates the fact that Jesus, the true Son of God, is the Savior of the world. He is the Savior of us gentiles. He makes us God's dearly loved people. That light has come. Celebrate it and share it. Amen.