

*“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)*

Arise and Shine!

Last September, I flew to Minneapolis. The return flight was at night. I had a window seat, so as we flew back, I looked down into the night. If you’ve ever done that, you know what I saw: cities lit up, shining in the darkness. You could see all the little towns between here and Minneapolis. They looked like little circles of light with black all around them. The whole way back, you could see them in front of the plane and behind it, off to the side and right below. But there was one interruption: Lake Michigan. For ten or fifteen minutes, there was only blackness outside the window. But once we hit the Michigan shoreline, the points of light started again. Today, in our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah pictures the city of Jerusalem as a light in the darkness. Now, he never flew in an airplane, so he wasn’t picturing the same thing I saw last September. And ancient cities didn’t have electric lighting, so they would have been much darker than we’re used to. But Jerusalem is a city built on a hill. At night, the lights from the city would’ve been visible to people at a distance. Isaiah uses that picture to call the people of God to action. What action? **Arise and shine!**

I.

Isaiah says, **“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.”** Those are our marching orders. But what do they mean? The key is the little word “for.” “Arise, shine, *for* you light has come.” Isaiah is telling us why we need to arise and shine, because our light has come. The light, of course, is Christ. This is a prophecy of his coming. That birth in Bethlehem was the sunrise of God’s glory on Israel. God called Israel out of slavery so that his Son could take on human flesh and come into the world through them. God gave them a homeland and guided their history, God sent prophets to teach them and warn them when they sinned, God sent them into exile and brought them back all for one, great, overarching purpose: so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem in Judea during the time of King Herod. Or as Isaiah said it here, so that the light would come and the glory of the Lord would rise over Jerusalem.

Isaiah said, **“See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.”** What is the darkness? Isaiah uses two different words for darkness here. One is the normal word for darkness. But the other word – the one translated here as “thick darkness” – is special. When God came down on Mt. Sinai and covered it with smoke and fire, he called Moses up “into the darkness.” There and a number of other times in

the Old Testament, God uses this word to speak of the darkness that hides him from us sinners. This word is also used a number of times in the Old Testament for the effects of sin in this world and that is the point here. But are those two usages really different? Why does God hide himself from us in thick darkness? God told Moses that no one can see his face and live. Why not? Isn't that our hope of heaven, that we are going to see God face to face? Sure it is. But that comes only after this sinful life ends. Sin is the problem. Our sin makes us guilty and God's justice has to punish us with death and hell. That's just who God is.

So the darkness that covers this world and the darkness that hides God's face are two sides of the same coin. The darkness hides God from us to save us from death. But the darkness covers this world like pollution fouling the air around a factory. There are cities in the developing world where the factories belch so much smoke, you can't see the sun. That used to be true of some cities in the US. Sin is a pollution that blackens the sky and hides God from us. It ruins the world we live in. Sin brings death and sadness and pain. Sin breeds violence and hatred. It's the root cause of all that's wrong with this world.

Most of all, sin makes us sinners ignorant of God. Thick darkness covers the world because every human being is born a sinner. So God chose Israel and taught them to know him. He gave them the Old Testament promises of a Savior to come. God promised that light would dawn, and he kept that promise in Bethlehem. But that light only rose on Israel. The rest of the world was lost in thick darkness, racing to hell, in ignorance and rebellion. But God didn't plan to leave the rest of the world in darkness. So he told Israel to rise and shine. Even though Isaiah never flew in an airplane, I really think that image of a city blazing into the night, surrounded by darkness, does justice to this image.

That's what the rest of this reading describes: the gospel going out from Israel and into the gentile world – our world – and bringing us into the light. Isaiah describes that like a city on a hill, the only city where the sun shines, whose light radiates over the countryside and people throng to it, eager to escape the darkness. He says, **“Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”** The one little nation of Israel is overwhelmed as many nations and many kinds of people come to the light. That's us. When Jesus ascended into heaven, the church was overwhelmingly Jewish. But within one or two generations, nations had flooded it. Today, there are literally billions of gentile believers all over this world.

The next couple of verses are poetic descriptions of whole peoples coming, carrying their little children to the light that blazes out of that one city that isn't covered with darkness. They come bringing all their wealth – why? Not to show off. To bring an offering. That is a picture of us gentiles supporting the gospel ministry for two thousand years, at least. Isaiah saw how the church would change and grow when God sent the good news of Christ out to us. That is the motivation from start to finish in this lesson: the good news has come. These are our marching orders: **Arise and shine because your Light has come!**

II.

But that command was given first to Israel. What does it have to do with us? God takes us foreigners, who look different and talk different, who have different customs and ways of thinking, and he brings us into his people. From God's perspective, there is only one people of faith, one true Israel. St. Peter once told the gentiles he served, **“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.”** So we have been naturalized, if you will, into Israel. And Peter said that God did that so that we **“may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light.”** Do you see the connection? God chose Israel to bring the Light of Christ into the world. The Light shone on them and they were to use that light to bring gentiles in. Then we gentiles become Israel, so now we have the command to arise and shine. We have the mission of sharing that gospel with the world and bringing more and more people into God's church, into the true people of Israel.

We're the insiders now, so that's our mission. I think that one of the things Isaiah pictured needs to be talked about. He said, **“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.”** So God underlines for Israel that his plan is to bring the world into their tiny little nation. He goes on and says, **“Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy.”** Their attitude will be pure joy at having all these strangers, all these foreigners, flood into their people.

Was it easy to achieve that joy? No. The book of Acts shows us some of the struggles that took place when the church was flooded with people who were different. And who wants to become a minority in their own church? Imagine how we would feel here at Peace if suddenly we had an influx of new members who

didn't grow up Lutheran, who had never even thought of having a Christian school, who spoke English with an accent or had a different skin color. How would we feel if they wanted to change things – service times, ways that we worship, ways that we decorate our church or celebrate the holidays? Would we welcome their input? Or would we want them to sit down and follow our lead and earn the right to tell us what they want? Would we be tempted to look down our noses at them? Would we wish they would find someplace else to worship?

Isaiah pictured joy that all these different people were coming in. Would we experience that joy? On one level, I'm sure we would. We are believers and the new man in us would rejoice that God had brought people to faith. But is it easier to rejoice that people who are different from us come to faith when they're in another country or go to a different congregation? If it happened here, would our sinful selfishness invent excuses to dismiss those people? Would we feel threatened and magnify little things into big issues to give ourselves an excuse to walk away? I hope we wouldn't. But there's a lot of history of Christian churches experiencing conflict when they tried to serve new people – that history starts in the book of Acts. Where does that conflict come from? From sin. From the thick darkness that covers our hearts. Part of that darkness is mistaking what we want for God's will for his church.

Now, beloved traditions and meaningful practices matter. Doctrine certainly matters. All that we do as a church should be founded on the desire to live and serve and worship in a way that follows God's teachings. But God gives us a lot of freedom in how we do things. It's very easy for us sinners to confuse things that we like for things that God commands. Most sinners are uncomfortable with people who are different. Most sinners don't like having to make changes to accommodate people who only got here yesterday. Are we like that? Well, we're sinners, too, aren't we? Don't we have to admit that we can fall into the sin of being more anxious about our comfort zone than we are joyful about the opportunity to bring new souls to Christ? Don't we have to admit that it's hard to know when a practice or a custom needs to be kept for the good of the gospel and when it's just what I want because I like it better? If our hearts were perfect, we wouldn't struggle with those things. We would rejoice in every new sinner who hears the gospel. But our hearts aren't perfect and change, even necessary change, is hard for us. It's hard to put sharing the good news above things we know and love.

But that's why Jesus came. The thick darkness of sin has settled over our hearts. But the light of Christ blasts through it. Jesus was born in that stable of Bethlehem to bring us out of the darkness and into the light. He lived a life of perfect love and outreach. He always balanced the need to preserve the truth with the need to be flexible and welcoming to people who don't know the gospel as well as we do. He loved all people, not just the ones who make it to church regularly. He did all that in our place. God counts all those things that Jesus did as things that we have done perfectly, all our lives long. Then Jesus died for that sin in our hearts that makes it hard for us to put other people first. He died for the selfishness that refuses to rejoice at people flooding into our church if it's going to change the church we know and love. His blood washed all that sin away. Jesus rose to tell us we are forgiven. Jesus rose to shine his light on our hearts, again and again, day after day, as we wrestle with how hard it really is to be a Christian who welcomes people into the light. He rose to tell us that all our failures and sins are gone forever and we will live with him forever.

That is our motivation to arise and shine. God has swept away all that is wrong with us. God uses that love to change our hearts and to help us to overcome attitudes that really don't help the church do its work. God uses the gospel to enable us to rejoice at the opportunities he gives us to share the gospel and he uses that message to give us the strength to share it. Then he tells us, to whom the light has already come: **arise and shine because you get to share the light.** My friends, let's commit ourselves and our congregation to doing all that we can to share that light, here and throughout the world. May God give us joy as we share that message. May God bless our efforts. Amen.