

“Light in Our Darkness”
January 3, 2021
Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

*Stay with us, O Lord Jesus Christ,
Night will soon fall.
Then stay with us, O Lord Jesus Christ,
Light in our darkness!*

The movement from darkness into light is a theme we find all through scripture. In fact, it's a common theme in virtually every religion in the world. It's central to the whole human condition. Part of the reason for that is physical. Modern people in our part of the world don't really appreciate anymore the desire for light when darkness falls. We have all sorts of artificial lighting we rely on. So, we aren't as in tune with the fear and mystery that darkness can inspire. As long as we can flip a switch and eliminate darkness, we're pretty comfortable with it. But every now and then, when the power suddenly goes off, we may feel ourselves panic a little, just for a moment. We're suddenly thrust into the world of our ancestors, longing for light.

But for scripture physical light wasn't the biggest problem; it was one everyone shared and had to deal with no matter who they were or where they were from. Spiritual and intellectual light were a more important concern. Over and over we find stories of people seeking their way out of spiritual darkness, led by some form of light. When the night falls for Abraham he is plunged into a deep and terrifying darkness, only to be answered by a covenant sealed with a flaming pot and a torch. The Hebrews, the children of Israel, are led through the dark desert of their wandering by a pillar of fire. And of course the magi are led by the light of a shining star out of Gentile darkness to Bethlehem and the Christ child.

So, when Isaiah tells the people of Israel, struggling to re-build their society, “Arise! Shine! Your light has come,” he's reminding them that darkness is an illusion if we have eyes to see the light dawning around us. And he's giving them a new sense of meaning. They're not meant to close in on themselves and keep the world at bay. They're meant to be a beacon of light to draw the world to God's presence among them.

Isaiah's Israel was at a liminal moment in their history. They were on the boundary of a past of oppression in exile and a future of justice. They could stay in darkness or they could move toward light, but it wasn't certain which way they might go. We don't know much about the darkness the magi may have left behind when they set out to follow the star but we're told they went home by another way, crossing a boundary in their spiritual journey.

Epiphany is about recognizing those boundaries in our lives and in the world where we can move from darkness into light. And if that's the case, then what does it look like? I think the description in Isaiah can give us some insight. The imagery Isaiah uses is a movement from division to unity, from suspicion and rejection to acceptance, from fear to joy. All the nations will be drawn to Jerusalem, attracted by the light rising there. No one is coerced, no violence is required, it is a joyful pilgrimage. And those who bring gifts bring them out of a sense of

expectation and hope, not obligation or to manipulate. The gifts they bring are an expression of their devotion and their love.

That's the world we're drawn to as followers of Jesus. Our epiphany is the realization that leaders who claim to have all the answers, who claim they alone can fix us, whose mantra is "America first!" belong in the darkness. We are called to the light of compassion and mutual dependence, to the light of justice and generosity, no matter what the cost. Isaiah tells the people, "Lift up your eyes and look around!" The light has already dawned on them; they are God's light in the world. The magi see the light dawning in the birth of Jesus and drop everything to go. So, none of this is some pipe dream, some wistful hope in the sweet bye and bye. God's light emerging in the world is a reality in their moment. And it can be a reality in this moment.

We can be light in the world's darkness. When we see others fully and reject the idea that we're in some kind of competition against enemies whose humanity we can ignore because of their skin color or their religion or their sexual identity, then we become God's light in the world. When we are open and welcoming to people who have been tossed aside by society, we become a beacon of hope, a place to which the world is drawn. Epiphany is how we express our commitment to that identity, that mission, to be God's light.

After the magi leave, word comes to Joseph and Mary of Herod's wrath raining down on them. When light overcomes darkness there are those who will not accept it, who just can't bear it, who prefer the darkness of violence in their attempt to hold onto power. So, there's a risk of being God's light. There's a risk in accepting what the world's darkness rejects. Still, it's who we are called to be. A little later in Matthew's gospel, after Jesus is grown and teaching, he will turn one day to his followers and proclaim, "You are the light of the world!" He sees that in them, just as Isaiah saw God's light shining in the people around him, just as the magi saw the light of the star leading them on. God sees us for who we are and for who we could be. Jesus is the light in our darkness to show us the way, to call us off the dark road of fear and isolation and lead us home by another road, the road that brings us, even now, even in these dark times, into the light of compassion, healing and joy.

Amen