



Sermon for the Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6

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I want to look this evening at our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 60:1-6. Consider that Isaiah wrote these words when Ahaz was king of Judah. There were a lot of evil kings, but Ahaz was one of the worst and he was dragging the nation down with him into sin and darkness. It wouldn't be that many years before the people who had been called to be a light to the Gentiles, would be virtually wiped out. For years the people of Judah, this small little nation, had lived under threat. They were surrounded by super powers: Syria to the north, Egypt to the south, and the biggest and strongest, Assyrian, to the east. Little Judah was the crossroads of the world. It was a good place to stand as a light to the nations, but it was also territory that every great nation wanted for itself. Eventually the Babylonians overran Judah and when they were gone everything was destroyed. The cities were demolished, the farms and crops were destroyed, and even in Jerusalem, the great Temple was in ruins – and worst of all, everyone but the poorest of the poor had been marched off to exile in a foreign land across the desert. It doesn't get much darker than that. The Jews in exile were a people almost totally without hope. To them it looked like the light had been extinguished.

And yet into the darkness Isaiah spoke the word of the Lord, speaking of another time in the future that would be just as dark. And yet into that darkness would come the true light – the Christ.

Isaiah's vision was true. When Jesus came into the world there were a few people who had eyes open to the light – people like Zechariah and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary. There were people who were looking for the light and knew it when they saw it like Simeon and Anna. There were some shepherd from the countryside near Bethlehem who saw the light and some magi from the East who came, drawn by the light, looking for the King of the Jews. But aside from those

few people, no one was really very concerned about the Saviour who had come. In Bethlehem everyone else slept through the night. Judea and Galilee had no idea about the light that had come. Isaiah writes about the time of the coming Messiah and says in verse 2:

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples...

But Isaiah could write that about our *own* time too. For two thousand years the light has been shining. It's been taken to every part of the world. It's been shined in all sorts of dark corners. But there are still people living in darkness everywhere. There are whole nations that are closed off to the light. Worse there are whole nations that once carried the light and that called themselves Christian, that have all but lost it. "Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the people." But into that darkness Isaiah cries – and I have to see him doing it with great exuberance:

Arise, shine, for your light has come...
(Isaiah 60:1)

What's he saying? Well, first we need to ask what the "light" is. Isaiah wasn't writing about his own time. There was a sense in which the Jews had a light to shine, but Isaiah's talking about a future light. The whole prophecy is a vision of the future – of what the story the Gospels tell us.

Think of the Christmas Gospel that St. John wrote: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1:4-5, 9). Simeon, the old priest understood the prophecy when he held Jesus in his arms. He sang out, "My eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32).

When Isaiah cries out "Your light has come!" he's talking about Jesus. When Jesus came he brought his light into the world, and yet when he ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father in heaven, *the light didn't leave us*. Jesus indwells each of his people in the person of his Holy Spirit. If we are in him, we carry his light with us and before he left he commissioned us to carry that light to the

world – to preach the Gospel to all peoples and nations. St Peter wrote, "We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a *lamp shining in a dark place*" (2 Peter 2:19).

As you and I preach Jesus Christ we shine the light of Christ into the souls of the men and women around us and as his light shines, the Holy Spirit draws men and women into relationship with himself. Isaiah proclaims: "Your light has come!" We're in the dark, but the day is coming. The Day Star is going to rise in our hearts. Through him the men and women living in darkness become children of light as God calls us into his marvellous light. Isaiah pointed a despairing people to a new covenant when the salvation that appeared in Jesus would drive away the darkness and God's kingdom would be built and would grow to fill the whole earth. Think of the stone in Daniel's vision, that was cut from the great mountain and sent by God crashing into that great statue of Gold, and Silver, and Bronze and Iron – that smashed the image of dark and evil earthly kingdoms to pieces and then expanded to fill the whole earth. The light of Christ was going to fill it all. And the light of Christ fills the whole earth because his kingdom people carry his light with them. Jesus said, "*You are the light of the world*" (Matthew 5:14). Isaiah's light is the light of Christ shining in and through us.

And that explains what he means when he says, "Arise, shine." That's the second important message in these verses. Isaiah spoke those words to Israel long before the Gentiles heard them. The call went first to Israel: The Light – the Saviour – is coming. Be on the watch. Be alert lest the time of God's salvation pass you by while you're asleep on duty. And having received God's salvation, Isaiah calls them not to hide the light. Don't put it under a basket, but hold it high. Hold it high enough that it chases away the darkness around you – high enough to draw the lost out of their darkness.

Most of the Jews didn't listen and God's salvation passed them by. But for the few who were awake and on guard when Jesus came, they heard Isaiah and through those first apostles the light was held high and went from Jerusalem, to Judea, and eventually to the whole world. Thanks to them the light went from family to family and from neighbour to neighbour and

eventually to our own countries and our own ancestors and then to each of us.

But Isaiah's call isn't just a call to ancient Israel or to the Apostles. The fact that you and I are walking in the light should be a reminder that his call is to you and me too. Keep walking in the light. Even the most mature of us still has dark corners we've kept closed off to the work of the Spirit of Jesus. Open them up. Let him lighten every dark corner of your life. And as our lights grow brighter, remember that the world is still full of people walking around in the dark. Be a light in every place you walk. Be a light at work and in your family and in the church. Live for others. Spread the light. That was the power of the apostles and early Church. We've become complacent. We've got the light, but we aren't sharing it. We aren't holding it high. The early Church spread and grew because those first Christians were excited about the light. They remembered what the darkness was like. They'd been rescued and all they could think of doing was plunging back into it – but this time with their bright light so that they could find others and save them from the darkness. We only have so much time. The day is almost over. Night is coming, but there's still a lot of work to do in the Lord's harvest and the labourers are few. We need to get serious and get busy about the Lord's work while we still have daylight.

Maybe we aren't busy because we think it's a waste of time. Isaiah says, "No! Lift up your eyes all around, and see..."

And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:4-6)

Brothers and sisters, that's the Christmas message and it's for every child of God. It

doesn't mean much if it doesn't have personal application to each of us. Think about that: "Your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." That's for *you*. The Saviour will fill your heart with the light of his grace and drive away the night of sin. The light shines for you and for me and he wants us to see his glory – the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

It's a holy light and if we receive it, it's going to shake us up. I'm always amazed at how casually we're prone to coming to the Lord's Table. Here he gives us himself to eat and drink. It's a sacramental sign of the reality that when we receive his light we make him our own. When we come to his Table, we meet him face to face in the bread and wine and should be reminded here, of all places, that in his love for us he gave his own body and blood. When we come to the Table we *should* be coming in such a way that we're reminded of all the dark corners we've still got in our lives. The fact is, no matter how often we invite the light to shine into those corners, each time we look, we're going to find another dark one. At the same time that it's so often a relief to purge the darkness, it can be discouraging to see the darkness that we don't seem to be able to get rid of.

We need Isaiah's assurance: "Your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you." The light gives hope. At the Table I like to think of the words of David from Psalm 112:4, "Unto the godly there ariseth up light in the darkness; he is merciful, loving, and righteous." As Isaiah says to us in verse 5, "Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult." When? When you experience the Lord as your light and your salvation. From the Table we can go back to the daily grind with new confidence and hope that our battles and struggles with the darkness will never be in vain.

And as we go back to the grind of the world from the Lord's Table our eyes should be opened again to the darkness in the world – to the fact that so many continue to walk in darkness. The light has come, but they haven't seen it. Again, Isaiah tells us, "Arise, shine!" Keep holding the light high. We all know people that make us wonder if they'll ever see the light. You've been holding the light in their face, maybe for years, and

yet they still don't see it. Isaiah's saying, "Don't give up! Your job is to shine the light, but opening the eyes is the Spirit's job. As long as you keep holding the light, it's never in vain. Have hope and trust God. Keep casting the net. It's true that we'll never catch every soul we cast the net for, but it's also just as true that we will catch every soul that God, in his good will, intends for us to catch.

Again, don't fall asleep on duty. Isaiah may have given the prophecy over 2500 years ago, but God is still fulfilling it today. As you come to the Lord's Table this evening, leave with renewed light and proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. The day is coming when Jesus will come back – when the Light himself will be here on earth and fills the whole world. We may get discouraged today as we feel like we're sometimes stumbling around in the half-light, but he has promised that our labour is not in vain and when his light fills the earth on the Last Day he'll open our eyes to the fact that he has kept his promise. We'll see that we didn't labour in vain. I think we'll be surprised to find that we've brought more to the light than we ever knew about – all because of our faithfulness in holding it high. So, brothers and sisters, arise and shine, because your light has come, and the Glory of the Lord has risen upon you!