

**January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

## **Isaiah 60:1-6 “Light for the Soul”**

There's been a stereotype floating around for I don't know how long that most kids are afraid of the dark. I'm not sure this is a fair stereotype though. Sure, I know a lot of kids who prefer to sleep with a night light on, but I know plenty of kids who prefer the dark when it comes to sleeping. I think that there may be some parents out there who want their kids to at least have a healthy respect for the dark, especially when they have kids who tend to wander out of bed in the middle of the night. Maybe that's why some parents tell their kids ghost stories or plant ideas in their heads that maybe there are monsters living under the bed who will grab them if their feet touch the floor at night. And I'm not sure parents do this with the intention of scarring their children for life because it might be one of those things passed on from generation to generation. Thankfully my parents did not pass this down to me. My imagination was wild enough for me to come up with my own monsters thank you very much. That didn't last long though. I've always preferred darkness to light when it's bedtime. Until recently though. I know I've told you all stories about how my wife sets traps for me to trip over or stub my toes at night. For the most part, I've learned to avoid these traps and I manage to dismantle most of them before I go to bed. But now our

old dog Ninja is in on the game. And he's out to get *everyone* in the house! He'll sneak around in the dark and strategically position himself in a way that becomes a tripping hazard so when someone inevitably steps on him or trips over him he lets out this horrific yelp. And because he's mostly black, we trip over him in broad daylight if he's hiding in the shadows. Now *everyone* in the house is a little nervous about walking around in the dark. But it's not the *dark* we fear, it's what's hiding in the dark that's waiting to trip us.

Light and darkness are powerful symbols in almost any language and culture. We have lots of sayings that make use of these symbols. We'll say things like, "We're living in dark times." Or we talk about how much we don't like being "kept in the dark." We say that people who suffer from depression are going through a "dark night of the soul." On the flip side, we talk about things that were once hidden as being "brought into light." Maybe after a time of doubt and confusion you have one of those moments where suddenly "the lights go on" for you. In Buddhism, the moment of conversion is called "enlightenment," and in our Christian tradition, especially in the Eastern Orthodox churches, it's called an "illumination."

You don't need an explanation for any of these symbols because they are somehow written into our human psyche

from birth. Maybe there is some credibility to that stereotype about kids being afraid of the dark. But have you ever heard of a child being afraid of the light? I know some adults who've been involved in shady business who may be afraid of the light, but that's a different kind of light. That's the light of truth like we talked about last week. The fact that we can move back and forth so easily between the literal meaning of the word light and the metaphorical meaning, almost without noticing, shows how naturally these symbols work for us.

Today we are celebrating Epiphany, which technically happened on Thursday, but because we don't have a special service on Epiphany like some churches, we celebrate it the Sunday after. Epiphany means "enlightenment," or "illumination." It's the moment where the lights go on for us. Last week I was telling you how we tend to ignore the wise men from the east on years that we use Luke's gospel for Christmas, but we make up for it on Epiphany because part of Epiphany is remembering the bright star that shined through the darkness of night to lead the wise men to Jesus. The passage that Kathy read was the prophecy from Isaiah that gives context to the wise men's visit to Jesus.

The point of Isaiah's prophecy and Matthew's story is to show how the light of God -- previously made known only to Israel -- is now for gentiles too which simply

means those who are not descendants of Israel. When you read this prophecy from Isaiah you can see where Matthew makes the connection to the Isaiah passage through the image of the gifts that the wise men brought to Jesus. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were exotic gifts that represented far-away gentile nations. But for we gathered here in our time and place, the idea that the God of Israel is now the God of everyone really isn't a shocking *new* revelation. In fact, we kind of take it for granted. Especially since we too are gentiles. So what does the Epiphany mean now? Is there anything new still being brought to light, or is it all in the distant past now?

Here's something to think about as we consider this passage from Isaiah and how it relates to the story of the wise men. The real issue wasn't just about who God accepts and welcomes. The issue here has to do with God's character. How does God operate? What are the ways and means by which God deals with the world and its peoples? And when the answers to these questions come to light, they still take us by surprise and leave us wondering and struggling with how we're supposed to live like this. How do we put these things into practice?

Well, the first thing to consider is this image of God drawing the gentiles to the light. What does that mean? It means God is not all about dividing us up into insiders and outsiders. God does not divide us up into clean and

unclean or acceptable and unacceptable. We might think that this is yesterday's news when we talk about God's relationship to the gentiles 2,000 years ago, but we struggle with this in so many other ways when we bring it up today. It is the fundamental human condition to think in divisive categories. No sooner do we let go of one old animosity when all of a sudden our darkness mutates and turns us against some other group. If it's not gentiles it's black people, or it's Asians, or it's women, or it's refugees, or it's homosexuals, or it's Muslims. Again and again we divide ourselves up into us and them and "us" is okay so long as we protect ourselves against "them" because "they" are a threat to everything we hold dear. After all, "they" are the source of all that is evil and corrupt. At least that's what *we* think. But God will have none of this. Think about this – in Matthew's gospel, the first people to recognize Jesus for who he really was were pagan astrologers from the vicinity of modern-day Iraq. Hey, I didn't write the book, I'm just telling you what's in it. When you see the story of the wise men in this light, you know that God is not going to respect any of *our* categories of who does or does not belong. Wherever the darkness of our prejudice and divisiveness settles, the light of God's love shines through and we have to either welcome it and embrace it, or go scuttling off to hide in the darkness of our own ignorance.

The second way in which new things are being brought to light is the never-ending surprise of the humility and vulnerability of the ways and means by which God operates. We keep wanting and expecting God to act in big powerful ways that no opposition on earth can resist. Even when we try to find words to define God, we begin with things like omnipotent and almighty. We want a God who deals with evil with an iron fist (that is unless it's *our* evil deeds). We want a God who wipes away the oppressors and deals out justice for all. This, of course, links back to my previous point, because when we think like this we are again dividing the world up into good guys (us) and bad guys (them) and expecting God to endorse *our* divisions and appoint *us* as the iron fist of justice. Think about this for a sec: Even the wise men were expecting to see a vision of power and wealth and influence when they went looking for the Christ child. Because the first place they went to look was in King Herod's palace. It made sense ... that's where rulers are born. That's where God would appear, right?

But God turned their expectations around and brought a surprising truth to light. And God has done this throughout the scriptures. We expect an avenging warrior God, but we get a vulnerable refugee baby. We expect a palace, but we get a village. We expect the religiously orthodox to recognize and honor his arrival, but instead we see only outsiders and nobodies. We expect a mighty

triumph, but instead we get someone who was crucified as a criminal.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come.” This epiphany goes on and on. We are continually surprised and even disturbed as God’s ways and means are brought to light. Over and over we look for one thing but we get another. In Jesus, who was hunted at birth and humiliated at death, God’s ways and means are brought to light. Love and mercy and relief seemed like a welcome idea when God was dealing with “us”, but when God is dealing with “them,” we wanted a God of judgement and vengeance and righteous anger. But as the light comes and makes known to us the God who is, we are called to respond. “Arise, shine; for your light has come.” As we are drawn to the light and as we kneel before this epiphany of God’s vulnerable love and grace, we are called to arise and shine; to shine forth this revelation in our own lives. Having received the gift of an epiphany, we are called to *be* an epiphany. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”