

THE LIGHT CHANGES THE WORLD
ISAIAH 60: 1-6; MATTHEW 2: 1-12
EPIPHANY SUNDAY
DR. JEANIE STANLEY
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Matthew 2: 1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.' " 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Our Old Testament passage comes from the Book of Isaiah. The Prophet Isaiah speaks a word of hope to those who were taken into Babylonian exile. The people were in despair. The Temple and city of Jerusalem had been destroyed. Jews were held captive far from home. The prophet's words brought hope to a particular people under particular historical circumstances, but the hope of which Isaiah speaks is a hope for all people in every time and place. This is the hope we celebrate on Epiphany Sunday. Listen to the Word of God from **Isaiah 60: 1-6**.

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. 5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6 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 proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Thanks be to God for this Holy Word. Let us pray. Lord of light, shine upon us this morning. Open our hearts and our minds so that we reflect your glory in our own time and place. Too often we complain about our lives, when there is cause for rejoicing. Inspire us through the Holy Spirit so that we see your light shining in our midst. Help us reflect your light and change the world in Christ's name. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock and Redeemer, God Emmanuel. Amen.

Biblical scholars are not certain when our passage from Isaiah was written, but it appears to be addressed to the Jews in Babylonian exile, sometime between 586 and 536 BCE. Over 2500 years ago, the people

in exile lost hope. The prophet told them to get up and look around because God's light had come. Arise and shine, Isaiah told them.

Light has been used as a metaphor for God throughout the ages. In contrast to dualistic religions that see a continuous struggle between forces of darkness and the forces of light, Jews and Christians believe God is sovereign over both darkness and light. God brought light in creation through the moon, the stars and the sun. God continues to bring light with the dawn of each new day.

We also associate light with holiness, wisdom and spiritual maturity. When we see the light or we are enlightened, we have learned the truth.

The light of God is said to be reflected in those who are holy or set apart by God. Artist renderings show the glow in different ways, including a halo often depicted around angels, saints and apostles. When Moses met God, the face of Moses became so radiant people were afraid to look at him. If we receive God's light, we reflect the light in the way we look, act and believe.

The Prophet Isaiah commanded those who received the light to arise and shine...and to look around for those who would come to them. Receiving the light gives hope for the future, but Isaiah commanded the people to act in the present.

Isaiah used the divine imperative: "you shall see and be radiant...Your hearts shall thrill and rejoice." Americans do not use the word "shall" much anymore. The only popular usage I could remember is the song sung at civil rights rallies led by Martin Luther King, "We shall overcome." The Prophet Isaiah and Martin Luther King used the divine imperative "shall" because they knew God would bring it to pass. The light, the understanding and the reality of God's plans for the future, is good. It will happen. When we receive the light, we catch God's vision of eternity; and it is good.

The metaphor of light and dark was more powerful in ancient times than it is today, when we bring light by the flip of a switch. Whether it is light or dark may not make much difference to us...then again, it may make all the difference in the world.

One pastor compared the experience of receiving God's light to actors on a blackened stage (Pidcock-Lester in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 196). If you are willing, please close your eyes and imagine that you are in a theater. The lights begin to dim until it is dark inside the theater. *No house lights are on, no footlights, no stage lights.* No lights on the floor. *The actors cannot see where they are going; they grope their way through their scenes.* You barely detect their movements. You hear some of them stumble. Others stay where they are. They are afraid to move.

Then from above the stage, beyond the catwalk, a single spotlight cuts into the darkness with a cone of brightness, casting a circle on the floor. The light shines on some of the actors who stumble blindly in darkness.

Why did the light shine on some actors and not on others? Why did the light appear at a particular time? The one who shines the spotlight does not say.

Actors in the light appear to be no better than those who remain in the dark. They are merely chosen, chosen for a purpose that goes beyond personal self-gratification and well-being. They have a part to play.

Those in the light get up and look around. They can see. They are not afraid. You can tell by their expressions that they are happy. They are elated by the light and the opportunities it provides.

The actors in the light see the stage in new ways. The light makes it possible to change the set. Moving a piece of furniture here or taking down a curtain over there would let the light shine in places that now are dark. The actors in the light change the set in significant ways. They can do so because of the light, which they did not create nor do they control.

The actors in the light remember what it is like to be in the dark. They move to the edge of the darkness and look around. They see actors moving tentatively toward them. They hold out their hands.

In a way, the stage is like our lives. Think of a time on the stage of your life when you received the light of Christ's love in a special way. Perhaps there was a breakthrough in your understanding of God. Where were you? How did the light of Christ come to you? Was it sudden and dramatic, or did it occur gradually over time until one day you had an "aha" moment? What was that like? Did you rejoice?

With the light comes responsibility. Those who receive the light are called to walk in the light. Having you been walking in the light lately, or have you slipped back into darkness?

Where do you find the light these days?

There is still darkness around those of us who receive the light. It takes courage to walk in the light, especially if we try to guide people out of the dark. Some people in the dark choose to stay there, and they want us to join them. Where do you see darkness? Are there people in the dark who want you to join them? Who are they?

It is time for the play to end. The theater lights are coming back on. The actors are taking their bows. You may open your eyes when you wish.

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you...

My friends, we are blessed because God's grace in Jesus Christ has shined upon us in the midst of a dark world. We received the light of God's love in Christ, not because we are better than those who remain in the dark. We have been chosen so that we might shine, rejoice and change the world.

Make no mistake, darkness still covers the earth, just as it did after Noah saw the floods recede, after Moses came down from the mountain, and after Jesus was born. When the wise men left for home, King Herod ordered the killing of innocent babies. Joseph and Mary took Jesus and fled to Egypt because of real danger. We live in the shadow of the cross, but Christ is victor, even over the darkness of evil and death.

Thick darkness is part of life, but we are children of the light. Like the people in exile long ago, we are called to arise and shine in 2010. When we experience the light of Christ, our hearts thrill and rejoice. We become radiant, perhaps only in the moment, but we can claim that radiance anytime.

On the news this past week, parents, whose son died after driving his car recklessly, spoke of spreading the light through driving education to teenagers in their son's school. The movie "The Blind Side" shows that schools, families, coaches and teachers can spread the light faithfully with dramatic results (20-20, ABC News 12/29/09). Quinton Aaron, who plays Michael Oher in the movie, received the light. His

mother told him about the casting opportunity, but she died before Quinton received the role. Quinton grew up in the Bronx instead of Memphis, but his life situation was dark like Michael's. The light spreads in ways we never imagine. It spreads through football and orchestra programs, like the one in Miami that changes families one practice, one instrumentalist at a time (NBC Nightly News, 12/26/09). The kids find the light of Christ in the music instead of turning to drugs in the dark.

Cecil Morris spreads the light by preparing over 400 meals for the homeless each day in a Mobile, Alabama shelter (NBC Nightly News 12/27/09). Cecil experienced the light of Christ as part of a recovery program for alcoholism. Now he directs meal preparation for the same ministry that changed his life.

There is darkness around children in Georgetown who are hungry or have no home or family. There is darkness in lives controlled by addiction. When people face verbal or physical abuse at school, at work or in the home, darkness covers the earth.

Darkness is a part of life. It may be the darkness of grief, loss, failed relationships or poor health. We may be covered in darkness because of bullies at school or betrayal by someone we trusted. Darkness comes with disappointment and failure, with loneliness and pain, and with feelings that life is not worth living.

If we are in the dark today, we are called to arise because our light has come. We receive the light in our baptism, in the Word read and proclaimed, in communion with our Lord and Savior and in the loving acts of the people of God. There is light on every page of our Bibles. There is light in every act of kindness.

I pray that we look around today and give thanks for the light of Christ we have received. I hope we resolve to shine the light of God's love more often this year. I hope one of our New Year Resolutions is to rejoice.

To get us started, I have asked our young disciples to help me lead us in singing, "Rise and Shine and Give God the Glory." If you are able rise and shine!