

The Epiphany of Our Lord

January 6, 2013

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Isaiah 60:1-6

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. “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. 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. 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.”

Have you been feeling a little down of late? This time of year will often do that to us. The holidays are over. It’s time to take down the tree and other decorations. The Christmas bills are coming in fast. The parties are over, families have left, and vacation time has quickly slipped away. The children, if they haven’t already, need to go back to school. Adults will be returning to a full week of work. For avid football fans, fantasy football is over, college football is almost done, and for some NFL fans your team is home early with no more games to be played. Many families have already had to deal with coughs, sickness, or flu and if these things haven’t come yet, chances are they will. To top it all off, spring is a long way away. We have many dreary days ahead. There are still many mornings where we will wake up to cold and darkness.

This is why I am grateful for the opportunity to gather with you today on this Epiphany. ***“Arise, shine!”*** In these dark days I rejoice that our hearts are enlightened by the brightness of the Epiphany message. ***“Your light has come!”*** I am happy to receive a much needed pick me up as Jesus is revealed as the Savior for the world, my Savior too! ***“The glory of the LORD rises upon you.”*** So Epiphany comes at the perfect time. In any dreary days ahead I pray the: **Epiphany Light shines through the darkness!**

These are certainly dark and dreary times for the people of Israel. Isaiah says ***“darkness covers the earth and thick darkness*** (or literally black clouds) ***is over the peoples.”*** Darkness is frequently used in Scripture as a symbol of ignorance, sin, grief, unbelief, woes of various kinds, and finally eternal damnation which is described as outer darkness. Isaiah had spent the previous two chapters pointing out this thick darkness over the peoples. In chapter 58, Isaiah writes about how the people tried to earn God’s favor by their fasting. But their fasting was shallow and hypocritical. People gave lip service to God and kept up with the outward appearance of religion but did little more. While the people kept the shell of their religious practices, they disregarded the essential component - the Messiah.

Therefore, in chapter 59, Isaiah presents them with an accurate view of their relationship with God. The sins of the people had constructed an impassable barrier between them and God. They could not penetrate or break through this barrier with their own effort and, as Isaiah writes, there simply was ***“no one to intervene.”*** It is a very

dark and dreary picture. Because of their sins, both the northern and southern kingdoms in Israel will be defeated and carried away into captivity. But even worse, because of their sins, they deserve God's eternal punishment. They could not change their relationship with God. They had no one to intervene - no one to help.

As much as we do not like to admit it, we are often just like the people of Israel. The darkness of sin covers us. Who of us can say that we always practice what we preach, or at least practice what God preaches? Our words do not always match up with what we are really thinking in our hearts. Our actions do not always line up with our words. Even here at church are we ever just going through the motions and worship God with our lips but our hearts are far from Him? Our own sinfulness covers us. This is seen in battered and broken relationships. Our sinfulness at times even puts up barriers even between those we should be closest to - our spouses and family and friends. But worst of all it puts a barrier between us and God. Because we are sinners living in a world completely corrupted by sin, ***"thick darkness is over the peoples."***

The results are every ugly, awful, evil thing we see in this world. The results are pain and sickness and sadness and death. In a small way this last week in our house I was reminded of the darkness that covers us. As a parent it has to be one of the hardest things to witness - watching your girl's heart be broken. A pet that my daughter took care of and loved dearly and even made a special Christmas card with suddenly got sick and died. What do you say to your heartbroken girl you love? You feel so helpless. There is no one to intervene - at least no human or parent or friends to stop the pain & hurt - to undo what sin and death has done.

So once again Epiphany has arrived at the perfect time. Isaiah gives the people of Israel and he gives us, two commands: ***"Arise, shine."*** Get up out of the dust and ashes. There is something you are going to want to pay attention to! ***"For your light has come."*** God is sending a Light to shine in the darkness. ***"The glory of the Lord rises upon you."*** The glory of the Lord is something that would appear at special times when God was about to intervene on behalf of His people. And indeed God does intervene. God responds. God acts. As Isaiah writes in chapter 59, ***"his own arm worked salvation."*** ***"See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you."***

There is only one Light to shine through the darkness. There is only one Light who can restore our relationship with God. There is only one Light who breaks the barrier that sin left between God and us. There is only Light who comes to bring us comfort and peace, only one Light who wipes our tears away forever. This is the Light who on the night of His birth the glory of the Lord to shone all around some shepherds as the angels filled the sky and sang in joy. This is the only Light that a bright light in the sky appeared to lead the Magi from afar to see. This Light of course is Jesus. He is the Light who came to shine in this dark place. Oh, how brightly Jesus shined! His thoughts always matched His Words. Jesus' actions were always in line with what He said. He loved everyone the way God wants us too, even His enemies, even us.

Jesus loved us so much He entered the darkness of this sinful world, but even more He allowed the darkness to overtake Him. On the cross that is what happened as God abandoned the Son He loved to outer darkness to pay for the sins of all. Jesus suffered the worst kind of darkness and death for us in order to bring us light and life.

When the stone was rolled away on the third day the brightest Light of all shone in this dark place. For we see the glorious victory over sin, and the devil, and yes even death!

Jesus is certainly the Savior God promised to send for Israel, the one Isaiah told them would come for them. But Epiphany reminds us Jesus is not only for the Jews, but also for Gentiles – other nations too. **“Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ”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.”** Do you see why this reading is used on this day we celebrate the Magi coming to worship and bringing gifts to Jesus? They were a part of the fulfillment of this prophecy as these people outside of Israel came to worship the King of Jews as their King too. So are we. **“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. 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.”** As they were filled with joy to worship Jesus, so are we. As they brought generous gifts and laid them at Jesus’ feet, so we bring them to our King.

For Jesus is the Light that shines through the darkness! That is what I said to Katie as the tears were running down her face and there was nothing I could do to take away her pain. This world is ruined because of sin. This world is not the way God wanted it or where we are meant to stay. I’m glad we have Jesus. Jesus came to be our Light. He came so we will one day go to live where God wants us to be – where there will never be any sadness or heartbreak or death. And who knows, maybe Katie will have a room in heaven filled with hamsters that will never die?

And if these are dark and dreary days ahead for you, if you have been feeling down of late, I will say the same thing. Aren’t you glad we have Jesus? At Christmas God gave us the Gift that we never want to set aside, because only Jesus is able to make our hearts throb and swell with true joy that will last. We have a Savior. We have a King. Worship Him. Listen to His Word which reminds us that we never have to go through anything alone. Come see His Light shine through the darkness. With your gifts, with your words, and with your lives proclaim His praise in this New Year. Yes, this is a perfect time for Epiphany. Amen.