

Isaiah 60, Shining In A Dark World

Epiphany 2018

Isaiah 60.1-6

60 Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
² For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
³ And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.
⁴ 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.
⁵ 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.
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 bring good news, the praises of the LORD.

Introduction

Message

Talking Christmas and Epiphany

Christmas is the celebration of God's light coming into the world. In the Northern Hemisphere where Christianity was formed through its first 1800 years, that coming of light into the darkness was celebrated in the darkest season of the year around winter solstice.

At this time Western Christians focused this celebration on the coming of Jesus as a baby. So the birth story is made to be the focus and we follow that nativity narrative.

Meanwhile in the Eastern Church the focus was seen to be the coming of the Magi and the Epiphany of God's light to the nations. This weekend is their big Christmas moment.

When we walked through Advent in December I was concerned that we actually register the darkness of the world without God's light as found in Christ. Nature seemed to help out here as in December Brabant received one hour of sunshine before Christmas. It has been dull to say the least!

Yesterday was the calendar feast day of Epiphany which is also marked in the West, often known as 'Three Kings' but better described in its Greek title as Epiphany, the showing forth or manifestation.

Text

If we go back to the years after Jesus and what scholars refer to as 'The Christ Event' those who had seen and experienced The Christ had to work out how to tell the story.

A Software Incarnation?



Now think about that for a moment. Something happens and you have to relate what happened both describing the event and its significance. Our son Nat is a software development engineer. I wondered how he might describe the coming of the Christ? This is what I imagine he might say:

“Due to some serious issues in the world wide web with corrupted code and malfunctioning algorithms such that every digital device is infected the supreme software architect and webmaster downloaded the perfect incorruptible operating system and program code as a clean install on one new device he had personally built in the hope that over time this installation might network to infect all other devices. Details are a bit unclear but it was somehow much more than clever AI. (Artificial Intelligence) This new installation ran as if the byte had never come out of the Apple!!”

Now that is obviously a bit of fun but the point is; we use the images and language available to us. We describe the new in terms of the old, the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. Just be thankful that the New Testament was not written as software documentation!

When those who knew Jesus came to tell the story of his coming they did so in terms found in the familiar sacred texts, what we know as the ‘Old Testament’

Prophecy -

- Pregnant Language
- Words that cannot be exhausted
- *Sensus Plenior*

One reason for this happening is the nature of prophecy that Hsiang Ling covered a bit last month. In my terms, “Prophecy is pregnant language.”

Something I have noticed about expectant mothers is that by about 8 months they have had enough! I have heard more than one heavily pregnant woman say: “I want to get this baby out!” That is like the burden of a prophetic person carrying words that burn their bones and weigh on their heart, even if those words are going to be received like a tax bill and not at all appreciated!

If you want to be Latin about it, there is a *sensus plenior* -a fuller meaning- in prophecy. This is why it is held sacred and listened to again and again as it continues to speak.

In terms of drink it’s like that citrus fruit than can be squeezed again and again or a bottomless coffee that always delivers. So when people who had experienced Jesus and the 3 amazing years that changed them forever read the Hebrew Scriptures and the great prophets, they saw Jesus in their words and found words with which to tell the Jesus story and relate its significance.

Isaiah 60.1-3

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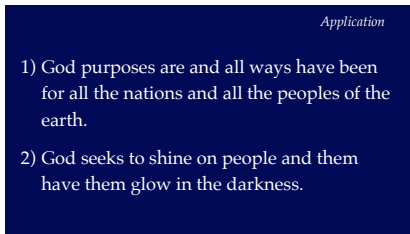
Now thinking about; the awareness of the darkness, prophetic hope and Epiphany, hear again these words from Isaiah spoken to people 600 years before Christ in different context and season:

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The message we may hear in this is simple: God's light has come but it will yet get very dark. Now is time to wake up and stand up to glow in the darkness. Peoples from all around will flock to you with their treasures in recognition of God's light in you.

That happening in and through Jesus is the Christmas story celebrated in the Eastern Church at Epiphany. That is what Matthew has in mind as he relates the story of the Magi and their gifts.

Application



If we now look at this prophecy through the lens of Christ, what is it saying to us?

I want to draw out two things for us as Trinity Church.

1. God purposes are and all ways have been for all the nations and all the peoples of the earth. The story of Adam and Eve is universal reflection on the human condition. Every story after that is about the human family in what was the known world of the 'Ancient Near East' and parts of Africa. God's concern and action has always had global scope.

Any attempt to limit the God of Israel to tribal or national dimensions is not true to the Bible story. The Bible's story is always of God calling specific people and specific families to himself for the purpose of reaching the whole human family, one nation to reach all the nations. One man blessed to bless all.

Unfortunately there is often a tendency for nations to presume that God is there only for them and against their enemies. Nationalism becomes idolatry. That is what a tribal god or nationalist totem is like. Not the LORD God of Israel! When we engage in cross-cultural mission we need point to Jesus as the light of all and not one encased in one culture only. Sundar Singh in India reflected this cross-cultural sensitivity when he said, "Christianity must be served in an Indian cup." - not a Western one.

This church here is only possible because we instinctively know that. In Christ, God's light has come for all of us and is not captured in any one culture as a single size that fits all. That is the excitement of Epiphany. Yes, the world is darkening but God's light has come in Christ, there is light and those who receive him can shine in the dark for all those who seek light, even superstitious astrologers who might today be described as 'New Age'!

2. The second point to note is how God seeks to shine on people and them have them glow in the darkness.

That is implicit in Isaiah and continues in Jesus.

I wonder how many of us understand that? God shines on you in Jesus and desires you to stand and glow in the dark to his glory.

Let's me expose some things that come against this.

In my hearing the natural prayer of most people is: "Lord, take away the darkness" or, "Fix the lighting issues".

We tend to being very pragmatic where God is sought to service our issues and light our way.

I hear something different in Isaiah. He shines on us so we may stand and shine for him to benefit others, even people we may not care much about.

Illustration A

In early November we learned that someone who fellowshiped here for 5 years a decade ago had symptoms that suggested very advanced aggressive cancer. I am referring to Sam Adams. Sam was 41 and from this first contact had another 6 weeks before Barbara took her funeral with Sam's one year-old daughter present.

I got to see Sam in her last week and her body was failing, but she was shining. The Christ-light was on. She was still glowing in the gathering gloom of her circumstance because she had received Christ and knew in whom she believed. Everyone saw that how ever it was described or accounted for.

Here is the thing:

The prophetic instruction is to stand in the gloom and shine because of God's light come to us.

There seem to be two things I feel to point out in this.

A. The instruction is to stand tall, get on your feet, break the skyline and be defined.

I am aware that both New Zealand and the Netherlands have ways of cutting down the 'tall poppies'. In Dutch it's the head that rises above the canopy of the average - *het maaiveld*.

Do you know that pressure, be normal, don't stand out, keep you head down and so on? Jesus know about this and addressed it with the image of a lamp hidden under a bushel.¹ His message is that a light source is placed prominently to shine for all to benefit from, not hidden from view.

Keeping you head down, complying with society's idea of normal and fitting in is the opposite of what God's prophet Isaiah tells the people on whom the light has shone. He brings God's message as being: "Stand up and shine. Be out there and let yourself be seen in my glory. Then people will come to you."

Let me ask a diagnostic question: What does that stir up in you?

Whatever that stirs reveals where you are with God in this.

Do you experience excitement, fear, resolve or...?

Are you free to stand tall and let the light shine, or are you kept low and shielded for some reason?

B. The second thing is something I have already alluded to.

God's light shines on us for his universal purposes. Christ did not come to have us focus on our personal darkness and beg for light at every turn. Christ did not come to help us in our daily life as if his being a personal life coach was the whole agenda and mission purpose. We all need encouragement but God's purpose is actually bigger than us. This may really land hard but let's hear it.

Illustration B

Some years ago a young engaged Dutch couple came to our home for marriage preparation. He was an electrical engineer. When they left I couldn't but help notice that neither of them had lights on their bikes. So at the next opportunity I thought I would quietly take this up with said electrical engineer. I suggested that his duty of care for his fiancé involved safety and making sure her bike lights worked. Surely a small task for his skill set?

¹ It appears in Matthew 5:14-15, Mark 4:21-25 & Luke 8:16-18.

Some background about me here: Part of my courting Barbara involved checking the sparkplugs in her car!! It's what men used to do! My notion of romantic care involves attending to basic safety issues such as bike lights. So I was puzzled when for addressing this issue here I got to hear some classic *eigenwijsheid* / 'Pigheadedness'.

The point of this story is that this young couple only considered the situation in terms of their own ability to navigate, or their need for light. It was all about them and they were OK. So as a recent arrival in this bright metropolis -with laws made to be ignored as often as possible- I was told not to worry. So much for 'see and be seen'!

We don't have lights on our bikes and our cars just for us do we? We shine so that others may see even if we might not need it. The world is bigger than us and God's love for the world is bigger than us. That is what Isaiah 60 and Epiphany are pointing to.

Conclusion

In a few weeks time we will hear Jesus say: "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." I am describing the sort of repentance or transformation of thinking that may need to happen among church folk who love God yet fail to shine because that option is neglected.

Let's end with this prophecy that shapes the Epiphany story and guides our response to Christmas.

Shall we declare it together?

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