

God's Light

Epiphany of the Lord

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.

Today is Epiphany—one of the most important and neglected holidays of the Christian year—it is when we see the first revelation of Christ to the Gentiles. Epiphany points us to God's universal love and universal sovereignty.

To understand the content of this epiphany, we must begin with the exiles from Judah as they wait in Babylon for the word that will send them home. In the middle of the sixth century before Christ, things seem as dark as they have ever been, with little left to sustain the hopes of the Judeans. They are exiled from their land; the temple has been destroyed; and the dynasty of David has come to disastrous end. **Kendra G. Hotz**

"How lonely sits the city that was once full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!" (Lam. 1:1) With these words a poet describes Jerusalem's despair during the days of Babylonian exile (586-538 BCE). Like a person ravaged beyond repair, the city sobs, its stomach churns, its heart turns over, even its gates and roads mourn, for its inhabitants have been stripped of the life they once

knew. Jerusalem stretches out her hands, she calls for help, but as the deadening refrain that runs throughout Lamentations 1 makes clear, "there is no one to comfort her" (1:17; cf. vv. 2, 9, 16, 21).

These grief-wracked words—"no one to comfort her"—convey the only future Jerusalem can see, until the prophet who speaks in Isaiah 40-55 dares to imagine a new beginning. In the heavenly council, God issues a directive, "Comfort, comfort my people... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem" (40:1-2). The prophet, responding to God's directive, speaks the words he is given, and a message of hope begins to take shape, promise by promise (e.g., 49:13; 51:13; 59:20). The prophet punctuates the promises with words directing Jerusalem to prepare to celebrate what God is about to do: "Rouse yourself, rouse yourself! Stand up, O Jerusalem" (51:17); "Awake, awake!... Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem... Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem" (52:1, 2). The call to prepare for God's arrival reaches a crescendo in Isaiah 60-62. **Samuel E. Balentine**

In the midst of a people without land, temple, or leader, Isaiah describes the deep joy that they felt at the promise from King Cyrus of Persia that they could return to their land: the nations that have dominated Judah will ultimately come to kneel before it; the exiles will return to the land; lost sons and daughters will be gathered together again. Isaiah even describes how the sea to the west will pour its abundance into the land and the desert to the east with the wealth of camel caravans bringing gold and frankincense will pour wealth into Zion. The poverty and shame of exile will be overcome when all the wealth of the world pours into Zion and the city of exiles becomes a light to the nations. Isaiah bids the people, "Arise, shine; for your light has come."

But this light that has come to Israel is not for Israel alone. "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Throughout the Old Testament, God has used foreigners, outsiders, women, the least expected and sometimes most unsavory characters to fulfill God's will. Although the people and the authors often

missed this crucial truth, God has always been the universal sovereign over all humanity and, from the beginning, intended to bless all the families of the earth through the covenant with Abraham. **Kendra G. Hotz**

The opening section (vv. 1-3) begins with —"Arise, shine"—as the prophet continues (e.g., 51:17-23; 54:1-17) to address Zion as a woman in distress. The days of waiting for the "glory of the Lord" to be revealed (40:5) are over. The days when darkness covered the earth and left people groping like the blind for a way forward (59:9-10) have ended. The light of God has come, and that light, the shimmering radiance of "his [the LORD'S] glory" (v. 2), the prophet now declares to Zion, is "*your* light" (vv. 1, 3). This is God's extraordinary gift to Jerusalem, a gift of the gathering of children who will take away a mother's grief (v. 4) and in the wealth of offering brought from afar by other nations (vv. 6-13). But this gift is not Jerusalem's to hoard. It is a gift of light that shines its promise "to the nations" (cf. 42:6; 49:6), and thus, all those who see it, "nations" and "kings" beyond Israel, will come to its brightness.

The prophet continues "Lift up your eyes and look around." As a mother whose children were dead or dying, Zion lamented that God had forsaken her (49:14). Now, the prophet summons Zion to lift her head and see what God is doing. Sons and daughters are coming from far away (60:4), their arrival a first sign that those forcibly removed from their mother are on their way home. Along with them comes "the wealth of nations," gold and spices from desert traders in Midian, Ephah, and Sheba, flocks and rams from Kedar and Nebaioth. Such abundance surely enriches Jerusalem, but these gifts proclaim "the praise of the LORD," not the splendor of Jerusalem. They glorify God's house, not Zion's.

This "glory of *the LORD*" that shines in Jerusalem does not give Jerusalem the right to lord *its* glory over all others. We know through the life and ministry of Jesus that the God's light is to "bring forth justice to the nations" (42:1); God's Light extends God's salvation to "the ends of the earth" (45:22; 49:6), God's Light brings God's "covenant of peace" (54:10) extending its promise to "nations that do not know" Israel's God (55:5)

and to "foreigners" who do but fear they will not be included in God's purposes (56:3-4, 6); God's Light helps us know the full truth about God's love and mercy. **Samuel E.**

Balentine

Our epiphany comes when we read this text with the passage from Matthew. When the Gospel of Matthew describes the wise men coming from the East, the writer draws on the rich imagery of Isaiah to do it. The exiles likely imagined Israel's oppressors bowing down before the restored nation, paying tribute as vassal states, but Christian tradition has redeployed the imagery of Isaiah. The Isaiah of the exilic community could never have imagined the use to which Christians put these verses.

This epiphany reveals that even in his infancy Jesus Christ is for all humanity, not only for the chosen few. He is for the outsiders; he comes to draw people together: wise men from the East, Syrians from the north, Egyptians from the south, Romans from the west and you and me. The truth that grasps us in the moment of epiphany, the moment when Christ is revealed to the Gentiles, is that Jesus Christ is the very love of God incarnate, and that love cannot be confined to ethnic or national identity; it cannot be restricted by gender or claimed only by the powerful and privileged. Jesus Christ, as the new king of Israel, is in fact, Jesus Christ the sovereign ruler over all the earth. In him, at last, God's promise that Israel will be a light to the nations is fulfilled. The expansive scope of God's love in Jesus Christ means that all are invited, all are included. God's sovereign grace reaches out and calls in every last one of God's beloved children who will come from every compass point to worship God, to kneel before Christ, and to dine at the heavenly banquet. **Kendra G. Hotz**

The epiphany we remember and celebrate this day is framed by an important reminder. *Before* the summons to "arise" and "shine" is spoken, there is a prefacing word: God comes as Redeemer to those "who turn from transgression" (59:20). *After* the "Redeemed of the LORD" (62:12) have seen the light and committed themselves to walk in its path, there is another word from God: "I held out my hands... to a rebellious

people, who walk in a way that is not good" (65:2). Such are the expectations that attend the promises from God we celebrate. **Samuel E. Balentine**

Our scripture is one of the first that I memorized. It was one my brother was to learn as he became a godly man. This scripture is for us today as we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior; we are to arise and shine and tell others that God has sent his Son into the world to show us all the way of salvation. By our way of living we are to show others the way to the Light that only God can give! “Arise, shine; for your light has come!”

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