

Grace Lutheran Community, 7th January, 2018:
Commemoration of the Epiphany of our Lord

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 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.

Isaiah 60:1-2 (NRSV)

“Come on, Rise and Shine, Rise and Shine!”

How do you feel about rising in the morning? Are you one who is willing to wake and face each day, with a sense of joy and purpose in your heart. Or are there times when you find it difficult to ‘Rise and Shine’?

But this particular phrase ‘Rise and Shine’, traces its roots back to the passage before us in Isaiah 60.

Isaiah 60:1-2 "Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness will cover the earth And deep darkness the peoples; But the LORD will rise upon you And His glory will appear upon you.

This passage is a contrast in fortunes. It contrasts the glorious new day of light and glory that is coming with the night of great darkness that this world must pass through to get there. When you get to a scripture like this, you find that people interpret it in a few different ways.

Firstly the ‘In Context’ interpretation

To find the context of this scripture, you only have to read the surrounding passage. So what do we see? We saw at the end of Isaiah 59 that the LORD has rebuked His people. (Isaiah 59:2-3: Isaiah says, “Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that He does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness.”)

But now the LORD says, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. “ There is a message of hope.... A message of forgiveness.... A message of restoration... But if we are going to fully appreciate what this means for us today, we need first to ask, ‘Who is the ‘you’ in this passage?’

Who is the passage addressed to? It is addressed to Zion – a name, in its context, for the city of Jerusalem. The subject of the address does not distinctly appear until Isaiah 60:14, where it is found to be "the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel."

Zion has long been fallen in the dust from the prophet's standpoint, and covered with thick darkness. Now she is called to "rise" and "shine." For the light is come. Zion cannot shine with her own light, for she has no light of her own, having preferred to "walk in darkness" (Isaiah 59:9). But she may reflect the radiance which streams from the Person of the LORD, whose glory is risen upon her.

The opening line of Isaiah 60 is like a thunderbolt of glory from God. God comes, God interrupts, God arises and shines forth with His glory! And God's glory is always God's presence.

The glory of the Lord appears in the wilderness when the people complain about lacking food and God promises manna; when the Ark of the Covenant is completed, the glory of the Lord descends and fills it so that even Moses could not enter it; when Moses asks to see God's glory, God responds, "You cannot see my face"; it is the glory of the Lord that fills the sanctuary in Isaiah 6 (Holy! Holy! Holy!). Throughout the Scriptures God's presence, God's very own face, is designated by glory. And this coming, this shining forth is unconditional. God is always a God whose glory is a 'salvation glory'. The people's repentance, the mending of ways, the living out of justice is a response to this coming! It is not an attempt to be made right with God but it is thanksgiving for the one who comes, who reveals life and salvation in the midst of the community.

And ultimately, we see the fulfilment of Isaiah's words in Jesus.

At this church-time known as 'Epiphany' we remember that God has shone His light – in Jesus – into the world, and this 'light' is meant for all people. We also confess that we all need some sort of 'light' for life.

Jesus was born into the world to do what you could not do – to 'make everything right between you and God'. And herein is a wonderful 'good news mystery' 'for us: if you at any time have felt a sense of 'guilt' or 'weight' in your life then we may actually say that this is 'good news' – for the 'darkness' is being exposed to 'light'. If there were no light at all, there would no 'weight' or 'guilt' because we couldn't actually see it! . And, because as Christians, we know Jesus has died for all of our sins on the cross, we know that the real 'darkness' is dealt with because all of our sins are forgiven. 'Darkness' and 'guilt' can melt away in the glory of the light of Christ.

But there is a third meaning we may take to heart in reflecting on this word through the prophet Isaiah. God's light penetrates this world, and so we reflect on how God's light shines into each of our lives.

The apostle Paul says (and we have heard this day, Eph.2:3), "like the rest, we were *by nature* objects of wrath'. The reality is that we are born into this world without a knowledge of a *loving* God. We are born 'spiritually blind'. This is also the darkness which Isaiah speaks about, "Thick darkness is over the people'. This is a true 'darkness of the soul'.

It seems at times there are those who love the darkness.... Not only the darkness of the world... but a darkness of the soul... Maybe they feel comfortable in their misery. Or maybe, something along the lines of John 3:20 that says there are people "who hate the light and won't come to the light, because it clearly shows what they have done." But where is 'light' for us? Where is 'hope'? Where will we find true peace?

Sometimes we are told that if we want 'light' for our lives' we need to look within our selves. Many may tell us that there is an incredible amount of good, and an incredible amount of strength inside yourself: "If you would only reach deep within yourself, you would see how good you really are!" But this has not proven to be the case. Over and over again, people look within themselves for strength to bear up under trying circumstances, and that strength is not there. People look within themselves for something good, but the more closely you look within yourself, the more clear it becomes that there is a 'darkness' a 'selfishness', sin, and a sense of despair. God sees your soul as it really is, and He can see into every nook and cranny of our lives.

The prophet says "thick darkness is over the peoples." But..." God says, "...but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you." The birth of the Lord Jesus Christ is described in the Bible as the rising of the sun on a very dark place. The sun rises, and the darkness disappears.

What happens to the darkness of your sin and guilt when Jesus rises in your life? It disappears! Jesus shines his forgiveness and grace into your life, and the darkness in your soul disappears. The 'true light' we may have for life is the light of faith in God's amazing love and forgiveness and life to us all in Jesus.

The good news of Jesus continues to radiate over you and me. He continues to shine, so that we now can 'rise and shine'. We no longer wander aimlessly and hopelessly in life. Instead, as God tells us (Matt.5:16) we can shine as His light reflectors. The darkened world can now see that there is something different about us. The 'Light' has come, and this the 'light of Jesus' isn't just for you or me. Isaiah also says, "Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn"

Mother Theresa was once asked how she could continue doing what she did day after day: visiting the terminally ill; feeding the outcasts; and giving comfort to those who lay dying. There were those whom their society (and religion) had essentially said 'deserved to die'. In response Theresa is reported to have said, "It's not hard, because in each one I see the face of Christ in his more distressing disguises.' Her plea was that we reach out to others, and in doing so we reach out to Christ.

Within you, you have the light of Christ. God has shone the light of His love for all the world – in Jesus. Sometimes we can do 'dark things' and have 'dark thoughts'.

Epiphany is a reminder that God has come into this world in Jesus – and there is ‘light’ for life for all people. There is ‘light’ for life, for you are loved by God in Jesus.

The good news of Jesus continues to radiate over you and me. Our Lord Jesus Christ continues to shine, so that we now can ‘rise and shine’. And we ‘rise and shine’ not first in an effort of ‘good works’, but in a celebration of God’s holy, forgiving, and redeeming love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We no longer wander aimlessly and hopelessly in the dark. Your light has come, and it’s on you. Jesus has given His life to you. His presence is with and in you. This makes all the difference.

Truly, there is no way we can shine without Jesus. But we no longer have to be trapped in the frustration of living with only our own resources. What a joy it is to know we have a Saviour, when we’ve been sitting in darkness. This changes everything. You’ve been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, given you in your baptism. The Spirit will lead you in the light.

As you rejoice in God’s love for you, this is how you rise and shine and live in the light. Life is changed because of God's revelation of His glory in our lives. Light has come. No matter how dark or dim your circumstances might be, your light has come.

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. Darkness has covered the earth (as it did in the death of Jesus), and thick darkness the peoples (as sometimes we experience ‘dark moments’ and the weight of our own sin and foolish choices). But the LORD will arise upon you, His has appeared over you. You are loved by God in Jesus. Amen.