

...and the Glory of the Lord

Isaiah 60:1-6

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January 6, 2019

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60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

60:2 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.

60:3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

60:4 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.

60:5 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.

60:6 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.

We have survived the whole of Advent, Christmas Eve, Christmas, and even New Year's Day. We sat in the darkness, waiting for the hope in the birth of a baby in a manger, a baby that would give light to nations. We spent time with our families, our friends, our coworkers, and even strangers. So the question is, what on earth do we do now?

How do we live into this incarnation? What changes about us? What do we do differently?

Our text this week tells us that "This is it!" Arise, shine, for our light has come! The Glory of the Lord has risen!

The people to whom Isaiah was speaking were very eager to hear these words. The years of Babylonian exile were cruel and had worn them down. If it was them against the world, the world had seemingly won. Their lives were at the mercy of

the Persian bureaucracy, and there was so much in-fighting. Isaiah is calling them to snap out of it, using imperative verbs, demanding that they arise. Isaiah alludes to darkness twice; darkness covers the earth, and “thick” darkness covers the people, seeming to say that there is a literal cloud that separates God’s people from God. But that is the case no longer, for the Glory of the Lord has arrived to the people of Judah.

When I lived in Harrisonburg, I co-taught a class at Eastern Mennonite Seminary called “Formation in God’s Story.” This was for first year seminary students. I taught the class with some really interesting people.

Our syllabus was scattered and disjointed...I lectured on spiritual practices, the church and mental health, and the Gospel of John. The only rationale I can give for why I taught on those topics was that those were things I knew. One of my co-instructors became really excited about talking to the first year seminary students about “glory.”

So I prepared myself for listening to a 2 hour class session dedicated to “glory.” I like to think that I’m moderately intelligent, but what I heard was a very enthusiastic woman saying a lot of words that didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me. I love the theoretical, the academic, and the theological. But when it comes to something as abstract as “glory,” I need some practical application.

“Glory” is a word one hears a lot in their Christian life. It’s even used in secular circles. It can mean high renown, beauty, or taking great pride or pleasure. But in the case of our Isaiah text, those definitions seem to fit but not quite. In the case of this Isaiah text, it would appear to mean “light.” The Glory of the Lord is a literal light by which we can see.

“Light” is also a word we throw around a lot in the Christian life. We just ended a season where we were waiting for the light. And light serves as a euphemism for the incarnation. The coming of Jesus. The coming of hope. This is all predicated on the assumption that we love light. We wish for the light, we don’t want darkness. We stumble in the darkness, we see in the light.

With this logic, there is no glory in darkness. There is no beauty, no brilliance, no incarnation. But this doesn't sit well with me. Truth be told, I love darkness. I love nighttime. I rather appreciate these dark, cold Northern Indiana winters. I see an overcast sky and hope for snow. When I'm not feeling well, darkness is a welcomed friend. When I want to sleep or to rest, I need darkness. Without darkness, I cannot appreciate light.

The dark has also been a friend. And in the biblical story, it is also a well-known companion. There was darkness the day of Jesus' crucifixion. There's darkness over the land of Egypt in Exodus. Also in Exodus, Moses encounters "thick darkness" where "God was." Elsewhere in Isaiah, the prophet says that God makes both light and darkness. During Epiphany, we are told to encounter the light, the incarnation. But can we truly understand light if we do not reflect on the darkness from which we come? I think we also do a bit of this "darkness bashing" when we think of the New Year. Many of us talk about the horrible news of the last year, the bad events, the slow events, things that didn't go right or as planned. We wholeheartedly throw 2018 (or whatever passing year) into the trash and embrace 2019 for all its hope and promises...forgetting that 2019, like every year, will bring its share of darkness as well. I don't say this to be pessimistic. I only say this to be more pragmatic, life brings us darkness and light no matter the year or season.

In our season of Advent, we spent our time waiting. The connotation was that we were waiting in some darkness. But instead of sitting around and biding our time, we took 4 Sundays to have a deeper look into what this meant. We didn't despair, or lose hope, or even necessarily dwell in darkness. We sat with the darkness. We became content with the darkness. We better understood the darkness. So now, with the arrival of the incarnation, we truly see the Glory of the Lord.

As the bible tells us, darkness is not from Satan and the light from God, but God is the creator of both darkness and light. And as the Psalms tell us the dark is not dark to God, that even darkness is as light as daylight. I do not mean this in the sense that our grief, our depression, our anxiety, our doubts are generated by God specifically for us to experience, but I do think that in these moments we can

recount that 1) God is not overcome by darkness, 2) The incarnation is real and Epiphany is now, and 3) Learning to sit and dwell in darkness is part of what it means to encounter the new birth of Christ to humanity.

Back in 2010, I went on a Celtic Pilgrimage as my last elective course requirement for my degree at AMBS. This involved walking around to many holy sites in the U.K. Somewhere in Northern Ireland we acquired a guide to help us. As we walked, he told us stories of Celtic saints who had learned to walk with their monsters after coming to understand them, and how they became some of the most peaceful people to inhabit the earth. This stuck with me as I moved on with my life after this trip. I started to become more at peace with the darker times of the church calendar, such as the periods of Lent and Advent.

I started to move into this unhelpful theology that served me well for a few years but serves me no longer. The light is coming...we're in darkness now but that's not going to be forever, because God is in the light and God will make God's self known, and everything will be ok. While I do believe that everything will be ok, and that those who love God will indeed be in God's care, God is not absent from the darkness. God is in the darkness, just as surely God is in our Epiphany, and our Christmastime. In our stumbling, feeling what's around us and going on from there, in our inability to see anything clearly much less any sort of plan clearly, God is surely with us.

This Fall I became anxious. I knew that big congregational decisions were about to be made, we had done all these World Cafes, but what was going to happen? Anxiety is nothing new for me, it's a very kneejerk reaction I have to any number of stimuli, but this was different. This anxiety kept me from sleeping well. It was a knot in my stomach. It was the fight or flight reaction I had to thinking about church processes. It was in the trembling that took over my limbs and especially hands before meetings. It was in the rapid pulse that my FitBit couldn't clock so it showed me dashes that I took to mean "Get help for your tachycardia." My friends told me to "calm down or you'll go insane. It's never as bad as you think it is." And they were right, but I couldn't help but think that darkness will just be my life now. I'll keep stumbling around and hurting myself until the end of days.

So I entered a spiral of feeling anxious, then feeling bad for feeling anxious, then feeling worse because I know what happens to bodies that become too stressed and anxious. They give out and they're useless. Then I wouldn't be able to do all the things I needed to do...which would make me feel more anxious. Clearly, this mentality wasn't helping. And since my feelings tend to wax melodramatic when I'm in an anxiety spiral, I thought clearly this was all because of a huge disconnect I was having with God. Clearly, I wasn't listening, or following in a way I should follow, or not connecting with God in ways I was supposed to be connecting. Clearly, there was a God/Joanne gap and this was my fault. I just needed to fix it, and all would be well. Take my anxiety to God. Pray more. Or my favorite piece of advice, I needed to "let go."

It's not helpful to be told to let things go, however true that statement may be. Sure, I'll just let these super legitimate fears and concerns slide on by. Or better yet, I will try not to think about it. If it doesn't work, that's on me.

In the period of Advent that we just left, waiting on our Epiphany makes those 4 weeks some of the longest in the church year. Of course we're waiting. The Glory of the Lord has not yet arrived. We know it's going to come, our places of worship have never stopped just short of Jesus' birth. The incarnation is drawing near. But we can't deny that sitting in darkness happens.

I don't want to claim that the darkness is because of God, or God is making darkness happen for you for a certain reason or non-reason, but for all of us, sitting in some darkness at some point is inevitable. Maybe that darkness is waiting, or misunderstanding, or loss, or anxiety, depression, confusion, or lack of a clear path forward. We've lost sight of Epiphany, or maybe we know it's coming but that for the here and now, the deep darkness is upon us.

If I have learned anything about my own experiences in the waiting, the darkness, the knowledge or the forgetfulness of the Incarnation, it's God's presence in the midst of what Isaiah calls "thick darkness." The Glory of the Lord, the Light of the Incarnation did not just spring upon the people of Judah after some long absence on the part of God, God was always there. God was as much in the darkness as God is in the light that dawns upon us today.

In my own darkness, that more often than not takes the form of anxiety, I have learned, and am still learning, that to work with one's feelings involves sitting with those feelings. Instead of rushing to get to Epiphany, or to see God's glory, or to feel anything but the way I'm feeling, where do I see God in this darkness? How is God showing God's self to me, reaching out to me? How can God help me acknowledge that yes, I feel this way, and yes, I am still loved and accepted? How can I feel this darkness, acknowledge its presence, and sit with it for a while? Not rush to get rid of it, or distract myself, or will myself to another state of being. What does it mean to look at my darkness, to notice it, and know that it doesn't define me, overpower me, and that it isn't permanent? And once this happens, what does it mean to fully welcome the incarnation of the Epiphany?

Some of the most holy moments I've had have come from sitting in the darkness with God. One such recent incident happened a few weeks ago. I had a terrible night, and while the time indicated that the day was over and it was time to wind down and go to bed, I sat awake worried about my health, my future, my productivity, my effectiveness, and all sorts of existential baggage that seems to creep into my head just as I was trying to fall asleep. I started catastrophizing. I'm done for. This is it. I should probably just move away. Maybe I should move to another country. Change my name. Find a new profession. Get a new haircut. Go back to school. Something opposite from what I'm doing would clearly be an escape from the present darkness, or so I thought. I cried and I paced...I tried to go to sleep but got up and cried and paced again.

My phone made a dinging sound and my friend said she was just leaving her studio, and was I still awake? I sent paragraph after paragraph explaining how I was feeling, how my mind hurt from all my anxiety, how I was feeling betrayed by my own body, and how my life as I knew it was probably over. Her response was "Wow, ok. I'm coming over. I can't fix it but I can sit with you. Do you mind if I bring food?" When dealing with panic and anxiety I'm usually pretty sick to my stomach, but I wanted her to come so I sent her the helpful and petulant response of "Whatever."

I prayed for peace, for calm, and for sleep. I prayed that my friend coming would somehow make me feel better. When she came, I think I was facedown on my bed trying to get my pulse rate to slow down. I felt the bed shift when she plopped on it. I looked to my right and she was lying back with her shoes on and had tossed a huge bag of Burger King in between us. This was certainly not the divine rescue I was looking for. I would have laughed if I wasn't so nauseous. "This isn't gonna bother you, is it?" she asked as I saw her take a bite of something that maybe once was chicken. I said no, but wasn't sure I believed it. So we sat there, for the better part of an hour, me listening to her masticate the contents of a fast food bag, smelling fried potatoes and ketchup, with her saying (with a full mouth) "I totally get it. This makes total sense. You're not crazy. But things aren't always like this. You'll feel differently soon enough." And I fell asleep.

Then dawn came. It was abnormally bright and blinding for a Northern Indiana Fall morning. My friend was gone, leaving her share of greasy crumbs in my bed as well as a receipt with "I love you" written in what must have been lipstick. Now I've encountered the Glory of the Lord, the face of the incarnation in many ways. I've encountered God through worship, through music, on retreat, through study. I've even encountered the Glory of the Lord through other people. Maybe a kind pastor, or a spiritual director.

God's Advent and Epiphany came to me in the form of a blue-haired, 35 year old tattooed friend who jumped into bed with me, ate a meal, and stayed until I had fallen asleep. She spoke truth, and she didn't try to fix me. She sat there, doing her thing but never leaving, and of course, never taking her shoes off.

Isaiah 40 tells us this: And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

⁶A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

⁷The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever.”

The Glory of the Lord will indeed be revealed, and all people will see it. It may not look like angels, or light, or comfort. Glory is messy. Glory is very much undefined, something you can't name until it's right in front of you. Glory is the presence of the most high God, in our midst, burning in the souls of our deserving and undeserving selves. This Glory is in the dark, this Glory is in the light. May the Glory of the Lord dawn upon us in unexpected ways. May we have the eyes to see, and the ears to hear.