

Sermon for Epiphany
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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About 2700 years ago, the prophet Isaiah saw it all. He had already seen and reported that Israel would return from exile in Babylon. But there is more than that. And the passage we have read this morning is part of that “more”. In this passage, Isaiah sees the light of God’s glory shining so clearly on Israel, and from Israel, that the pagan nations of the earth coming from the far east and the far west to worship the only true God and give him their riches.

In the vision, darkness covers the earth. The pagan nations don’t have the light of knowing God. God has not revealed himself to them in the same way he has to Israel. It is through Jacob’s children that he has chosen to show himself. But even they are unfaithful. The light of God shines through the nation of Israel very dimly. They shade it out by chasing after the idolatrous gods of the other nations.

But now the light rises clearly in the darkness. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Wake up! Let the light shine through you and your life. The nations will see it and come.

You see, once they see the glory of the Lord shining in his people Israel, they will know and understand that there is only one God, the “Holy One of Israel”. And once they see how he deals with his people, they will want to worship the only true God, as well. The Phoenician traders will come in their ships all the way from Tarshish, which is at the other end of the Mediterranean. And the Arab traders will come in vast camel caravans from Sheba and Midian, bringing the treasures of the East. All the gentiles will bring back the sons and daughters of Israel who are scattered in exile. They will bring “the wealth of nations”, gold and incense, the most precious items among their wares.

All of these riches the gentiles will bring to lay before the Lord God in worship, and they “shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” Isaiah says they shall do all this because they see the light of God’s presence shining among his people. And by that light, they will see that this God is the one that deserves worship in all the ends of the earth.

And lo and behold, it turns out that this is literal. The glory of the Lord is once again present among his people. The Word became flesh and pitched his tabernacle among us. And the event was marked in the heavens by a star. And gentiles from the East come to the brightness of its rising. They bring gold and incense to lay before the Lord in worship. And can’t you just see Mary wide-eyed with amazement, not only at these outlandish visitors who have come hundreds of

miles to find her son, but also at the absolute faithfulness of God, who revealed it all seven hundred years before as one more sign that her own visitation from the angel was reliable.

But the story doesn't stop there, either. You see, Isaiah's vision is still not entirely fulfilled. The nations are still coming to the light of God revealed among his people. Those Babylonian magicians were just the first. But we can see a fulfillment of this prophecy in the Samaritan women at the well, and another at Pentecost, and another in the Ethiopian eunuch baptized by Philip, and another in Cornelius the centurion, and another in gentile church in Antioch. Everywhere gentiles came to the light of God shining among his people, we can point back to Isaiah, who saw it all beforehand.

St. Paul is the one who carries this principle in the early church. And here we can see the mercy of God active in overcoming and redeeming someone's past. It is Saul of Tarsus, the Jew of Jews, the strict Pharisee, the lover of Israel as the unique beneficiary of God's blessing; it is this Saul who is now called by his gentile name, Paul, who is given grace "to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ". Paul has received so much mercy that he now understands the mercy that is to be poured out on the gentiles: "how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." The fisherman, Peter, becomes the apostle to the Jews. But the Pharisee, Paul, becomes the apostle to the Gentiles. And he carries the message of the light of God shining among his people to as many places as the Holy Spirit will allow him to go.

Of course, we know that this message of the gospel lit the world on fire. In very little time, the light of the gospel spread to every corner of the Roman Empire and beyond. And in less than three hundred years, it had overtaken the Emperor himself, and the pagan Roman Empire was on its way to becoming the Holy Roman Empire. That's not just historical accident. It's the glory of the Lord being seen upon and among his people, shining in a world that is covered in the thick darkness of idolatry. It's the continuous working out of Isaiah's prophecy.

And we are a part of that process too. The ripples of prophecy on the pond of history reach all the way to us. Why do we exist? To know Christ and to make him known. To reflect his light in the darkness that is descending over the Western world. To send it into the places where people have never yet seen it. To seek him wherever he asks us to go and in whatever he asks us to do. Until all the nations have come to the light, and all rulers have come to the brightness that should be reflected in the church of Jesus Christ.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." That's what we exist to do. Let's do it.