

**The Epiphany of Our Lord**  
January 5, 2020  
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Farmington, New Mexico

**Isaiah 60:1-6** 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.

**“God’s Light Burns Brighter”**

Everything was gearing up for December 25th. Then it all comes down. The presents are unwrapped. Decorations get boxed up. Lights get taken down. As much as we look forward to the coming of Christmas and all the trappings surrounding the special day, it’s a little bit of a bummer to watch it all go away. And I suppose this is really poor timing to let you know we are planning to take down the Christmas decorations after church today. Bad recruitment pitch, I know.

Stores always have something to sell. There’s always another holiday around the corner. Decorations and seasonal specials on store shelves. But they all pretty much pale in comparison to the joy and light of Christmas.

Except the Christian faith. Christmas is just the beginning. The birth of Jesus is the starting place for our joy and gladness. The coming of Jesus brings greater joy and lasting happiness. That’s what we get from Epiphany. And today Isaiah has a message meant to enlighten, illuminate and animate God’s people. We want to be realistic and acknowledge the presence of darkness in our lives. But God’s light burns brighter. The light of Jesus overcomes that darkness. God’s light shines into the hearts of his people. God’s light radiates through our

lives. God's light burns brighter than any darkness we experience, more gloriously than any winter doldrums can throw at us. God's light burns brighter.

Isaiah begins by telling us why God's light needs to burn at all: **"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 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."** (Isaiah 60:1,2 ESV) Christmas means light for our world. The beginning of John's Gospel tells the coming of Jesus in poetic, almost philosophical phrasing: **"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him."** (John 1:9,10 NIV) To Christians the coming of Jesus is a game changer. It means light and life. The birth of Jesus means all the difference in everything we do. Yet for so many people, for so much of our world, that glory is incognito, unrecognized and uncelebrated.

"Dark Ages" is probably a familiar term for most of us, even those of us who aren't big history fans. Referring to the centuries following the decline of the Roman Empire, historians used it to describe the lack of cultural and economic improvements throughout Europe. It originated with the scholar Petrarch in the 1330s. Petrarch acknowledged there were some creative and intelligent people during those times, but overall it was a time of ignorance. In a spiritual sense, we can acknowledge that we have returned to a sort of Dark Ages. It's easy to identify terrorism and school violence, difficulty in economic improvements for whole classes of people, increases in depression and anxiety as signs of a new Dark Ages.

But there is a bigger, more dangerous darkness than the one dominating cable news and social media notifications. You have probably gotten enough of New Year's resolutions already. If you aren't someone who gets excited about setting goals for yourself, it can get annoying to hear about everyone's ambitious plans. You might even feel defensive, feeling like you have to explain why you aren't busy making those plans. It can be healthy to locate areas of your life that could use some improvements. It might improve your mental and physical health and your overall satisfaction and contentment to pick one or two things that would make life better. Most of the time, however, our goals and resolutions reveal something about ourselves. We try to be the light, we attempt to create our own glory. But we end up with darkness. It's the darkness of hearts focused almost exclusively on ourselves.

And like the Dark Ages, the danger comes in not even realizing the situation and spiritual environment we find ourselves in. Most of the time it's all about our happiness. When we separate happiness from the Light God provides, we make that capital H happiness, something ultimate in our lives. Capital H Happiness ends up being just another trap of the capital L Law. If we hold God at arm's length for our own happiness, we unwittingly find ourselves on the carousel of trying to do enough to achieve that standard that goes beyond mere contentment.

Matthew chapter 2 describes the way King Herod tried to snuff out the light of Jesus. God rescued his Son and kept him safe. But the Darkness of evil, jealousy and hatred persisted in their attempted to extinguish the light of Christ. John's Gospel tells us: **"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."** (John 1:4-5) Jesus didn't avoid the darkness of power hungry religious leaders. Jesus didn't shy away from the darkness of cowardly political puppets. They all worked trying to dominate with darkness. Tried, but were unsuccessful. Because Jesus faced the darkest evil of this world head on, he can promise: **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."** (John 8:12)

Anyone who has ever been to Rocky Mountain Christian Camp has vivid memories of hearing "Rise and shine and give God the glory." That's the wake up call blasted by a bullhorn calling tired campers out of their cozy sleeping bags. When Isaiah instructs God's people **"Arise, shine"** at first it sounds like something you have to do, an obligation you have to fulfill. (Isaiah 60:1) But then Isaiah goes on to explain that **"the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you."** (Isaiah 60:2) Rising and shining isn't something you have to do. You can't get that light from inside yourself. You can't shine without God filling you with his glory.

Isaiah describes Light that comes from outside ourselves. But then radiates widely into the world around us. It starts with God's light coming into our lives: **"Arise, shine, for your light has come."** (Isaiah 60:1) In the 1960s, Egypt built the Aswan High Dam on the Nile River. It had a 12-turbine hydroelectric plant which produces over 12 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity annually. At the dedication ceremony in 1971, President Gamal Abdel Nassar pushed the button that started the power generation plant. But the power which lit homes all over Egypt that night was not found in the finger of Nassar. It was found rather in the 200 billion cubic yards of water stored behind the dam. The light that shines in the hearts of God's people was stored up for centuries. It was constructed around promises like those recorded by the Prophet Isaiah. And then God's light came shining most clearly when Jesus came into the world at Christmas.

The light of Jesus' selflessness provides new life for God's people. The light of Jesus' sacrificial death gives a safe path for our ultimate destination. The light of Jesus when he rose over the darkness of death guarantees for God's people the truly enlightened life. But because you have that light provided by the coming of Jesus Christ, it gives gospel freedom. When you don't have to rely on your performance to find your worth, your light doesn't grow and fade with your good days and bad days. When you don't have to measure your value based on reaching your goals, the perfection of Jesus flows freely to God's people. Just being a Christian means God has some amazing things in store for his people. God does something more than unleash kilowatt-hours of electricity. God is doing amazing things through you for His kingdom.

That's what gives God's people lasting joy in this sin-darkened world. Isaiah describes it like a magnet drawing nations. People are looking for light, seeking joy from outside themselves for their lives. Of course there are some Israelites who has forsaken the Lord who are now

coming back to Him as their true light and life. But Isaiah has a bigger vision for God's light: **"Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar."** (Isaiah 60:4) This is a picture of heathens who come to know God. People who aren't believers being drawn to the world's Savior and trusting in him. It's the joy of someone who has created a better habit. Not just lost those 30 pounds, successfully stuck to the Keto diet, or ditched their dead end job to go back to school to pursue their dream of becoming a writer. It's the joy in the hearts of God's people when unbelievers come to faith.

Isaiah pictures those people streaming to God's light bringing **"gold and frankincense."** (Isaiah 60:6) We see the Magi in Matthew 2 giving gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gifts aren't forced. Offering praises aren't compelled under obligation. They just come from hearts filled with God's light and joy. God's people bring Him their best, from hearts filled with devotion and gratitude. Nothing we could give could ever compare with the gift we have in Jesus Christ. Our best treasures dull in comparison to God giving us his own Son. Our praise is automatic when we see God's glory on display in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. The good news naturally falls from our lips when we see Jesus still at work bringing light to every day of our lives. For God's people, it can be just an awareness of the light you have and how to put it to use. What habits can you adopt that can impact the world? What can I do today to give God glory? How can I reflect God's goodness to me in the way I treat my family? How can I look past myself and own desires and look to impact the people around me with the good news of Jesus?

Epiphany keeps the light of Christmas shining brightly in the lives of God's people. Epiphany literally means appearing or manifestation. The best part of Christmas gifts isn't when they are under the tree. It's when they get unwrapped, when they create joy and thanks, when they get used. The Magi who come to find Jesus teach us Jesus is the gift for all people. The light of what Jesus came to accomplish spreads. Over the next few weeks we will see the implications and impact of Christmas. Christ's revealing creates the mission for his church. Next week we see the Baptism of Jesus. The final Sunday of Epiphany wraps up with the Transfiguration of Jesus. The season highlights the major events in the life and ministry of Jesus. We are unwrapping this gift that changes our lives for now and for all eternity. The gift of Jesus brings light and joy to our lives. We get to use that light to give meaning and purpose to the lives of God's people. That allows the gospel light to grow inside our hearts and spread to those lives we touch. God's light burns brighter. Amen.

*+ To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority now and forever. Amen. +*