

Isaiah 60:1-3 – Be a Day Person!

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. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

No offense to the night people, those who work the late shift, who fly the night skies, or who are up all hours, but the appeal of today's Old Testament reading is to be a "day person." And the reason is also explicitly given—because "**your light has come.**" Of course, if we understand that, it quickly becomes clear that we're talking about something more than simply the difference between A.M. and P.M. In fact, day persons may be just as easily at work during the night as well as during the day. For the measure of a day person doesn't have anything to do with the sun or moon, but it does have everything to do with the Daystar from on high and with the disclosure of His glory. Those whose lives are lighted by this Daystar will prove to be day persons, powerful reflectors in a resistant and darkening world.

Certainly, that's good news for us as we gather in worship to celebrate the Epiphany of Our Lord. The term *epiphany* may not be part of your everyday vocabulary, nor need it be as long as its message gets through. Here is a good example of the word itself already being part of the message. For just as the word *epiphany* means "appearing" and the "manifestation of what was hidden," so the day of Epiphany and all of the Sundays after the Epiphany focus on the appearance of God.

How can we speak of God without having to deal with light? Little wonder that this day for centuries has been referred to as the Festival of Lights. There was a time when Easter was the great day for Christian celebration. But gradually the signs for God's presence were read back into the earlier moments of Christ's life, and so Epiphany emerged as the time to mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry, His baptism and His birth. Then sometime in the fourth century, when the Festival of the Nativity began to take hold, Epiphany, the Twelfth Day of Christmas as it was later called, was invested with special character to celebrate not so much the birth of Christ as His manifestation in power and glory and His appearing as "the Light of the world."

In some parts of the world, Epiphany, which always falls on January 6, is a national holiday. The work world slows down, school is out, and everyone enjoys a day off. In the United States, where the day of Epiphany comes and goes without any fanfare as just another day, Epiphany's message isn't heard. Our gathering in worship today is strong testimony to the fact that we expect more. We will not forfeit the opportunity to receive the gift of light as it appears in the announcement of Isaiah's message. We all have experienced what it means to be running out of light—where hope grows dim and we live in the shadows of deadening routine and doubt. When the glitter of the holidays wears off and we face once again the old realities, we need the refreshment of real light. The shine of tinsel quickly tarnishes, and the flashing lights of the world's view of Christmas fades. The homecomings are over, and the pressures and schedules of the work world are all back in place. We could be covered by shadows in a world filled with darkness, but we yearn to be day persons radiant with the light of God. What joy there is to hear the message: "**Arise, shine, for your light has come ...**".

Imagine for a moment how those first hearers responded to this announcement of the appearance of light. The reading envisions exiles returning from the land of captivity. Enlivened by the promise now becoming fulfillment, they have hearts of expectation and visions of reestablished goodness and glory. But what they actually encounter is disheartening and depressing. "**Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our**

holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins” (Is 64:10-11). The circumstances don’t match the promise. God’s absence appears stronger than His presence. Amid economic hardship and the staggering costs of reconstruction, it’s clear that the restoration of Zion wasn’t the occasion of blessing and honor. Depopulation, chaos, and suffering are everywhere. Viewing the Biblical Dresden of his time, the prophet refuses to resign. Moved by the Spirit of God, he is a day person who rallies the people around the penetrating light of God. The brutalities and the trivialities of life still abound. But God’s coming is seen as a light rising like a star on His people. Zion’s poverty is replaced by wealth. Nor is this epiphany of light restricted just to Israel. The light is radiant, and the nations will be drawn to it.

Who could miss the connection with the gift of light in the birth of Christ amid circumstances hardly reminiscent of power and glory? There in the darkness of the Judean night outcast shepherds welcome their exposure to the light as they find a different king, born not with the trappings of royalty or in an imperial palace but in a modest manger stall. The great ones from the East are drawn to the light as well. Led by the brightness of a star, these Wise Men bring their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They welcome the light and find in it cause to rejoice and to worship the King, unimposing infant though He be. Contrast with these day persons, who rejoice and worship and whose lives are being redirected by the light of the Lord, the figure of King Herod, whose exposure to the light creates anger and deceit. Informed by Scriptural proof and his supporters, he resists the message of the light. He is decidedly not a day person. Unnerved by the significance of the guiding star and what appears to be potential reverses for his own life, he retreats into a world of darkness. That’s a world that we also know all too well—a world of bloodshed and violence, power moves and vested control, homeless families and endless refugees.

The darkness is never far from any one of us. How could it be, when **“darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples” (Is 60:2)?** That’s not a statement of pessimism, as though people with positive outlooks could comfortably bypass this issue. It’s the diagnosis of a problem deeply lodged within the human heart. What is it about human nature that prefers the darkness to the light? Why is it somehow always easier to retreat into the night instead of faithfully living as a day person? A hint is already given to us in the constant flow of news stories about leaks, embarrassments, and exposures of weak character and betrayals in politics, religion, and just about every other area of life. In his book, *Choices: Making Right Decisions in a Complex World*, author Lewis Smedes gives us some striking reflections on what it means to be a day person or to be caught in the shadows of the night: *Am I willing to go public? ... A discouraging fact about human nature is that few of us can be trusted for very long to act responsibly behind a curtain ... Good things happened after God said, “Let there be light.” How long would illicit love affairs last if lovers met only in well-lit places? How many corrupting bribes would be made if they had to be made above the table? How many shady compromises would be offered to politicians if reporters were always listening in? The test of publicity gives no one absolute security against irresponsibility. Some of us are fools at high noon. And a lot of good things happen at midnight. But when we are being irresponsible, most of us prefer shadows.*

Change the metaphors and the time of the year for a moment and imagine yourself moving from a cold January day to a warm, muggy spring day. You are out in the garden, and accidentally you kick over a fairly large rock. All kinds of little bugs scurry back into dark corners and hidden crevices. They can’t stand the light. They hate it. Is it any different with that part within us that resists the light of Christ? Whether it be the darkness of disillusionment and skepticism that marked many of the first hearers of the prophet’s words, or whether it be the darkness of deceit and violence that overran King Herod or any of the many forms of greed and lust that infect human life, we all stand under the same judgment. **“Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light” (Jn 3:19).** Exposure not to the fluorescence of our modern times but to the light of Christ is always an unwelcome experience because it lays bare that Old Self within, who likes to cover sin with darkness. But where exposure is welcomed and repentance leads to faith, the light dispels

the darkness. Then "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7). To walk in the light is to be a day person. Thanks be to God that "the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it" (Jn 1:5).

Today affirm that Jesus Christ is the Light of the world! Wherever He is present, the darkness is in retreat. He shed His light over you in your baptism when He named you and declared, "You are mine!" He brightens your days with hope and with peace. His Word "is a lamp to [your] feet and a light for [your] path" (Ps 119:105). He blesses you with His Spirit who calls, gathers, and enlightens. He makes you into a day person. So "arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you." Always remember that such light is never manufactured or produced on your own. It comes simply as a gift. We don't contrive and generate the light ourselves. We reflect it. The relationship is clear. Detached from Christ, our reflective power fades. Receive Him at His table, speak to your heavenly Father in prayer, and walk in the Spirit, for the closer you are to the Lord who has claimed you, the more "you shall see and be radiant," and "your heart shall thrill and exult." Oh, the darkness will not go away. If there are times of suffering and God's way seems so incomprehensible, if life is tough and you hurt in head and heart, look to the light and know that even the darkness can help you to see clearly.

I leave for your reflection one final thought. Being a day person has tremendous impact not only on those who are around you but on the countless many beyond you as well. What better way is there to be a witness, and God knows how we need powerful witnessing in the church today. Will the vision of the prophet find fulfillment in our day—a vision that moves beyond the destiny of a particular people and a particular place to embrace the nations and to draw people from a wide world to the brightness of this rising? The challenge is clear and the resource for meeting that challenge is abundantly evident. So as we celebrate Epiphany today, this Festival of Lights, affirm and confess that the light has come. Receive Jesus. Then you can arise and shine and be a day person who counts.