

## Nations Shall Come To Your Light

### Isaiah 60:1-6

Lessons from Isaiah: Images of God's Messianic Kingdom on Earth

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Gracious God, may the light of your Word that you have spoken from eternity be a lamp for our pathway. May we see Jesus the Christ, the light of the world, more clearly. Amen.

The world has seen utter darkness this week, picture after picture of devastation and destitution. As it turns out, this is the Sunday we celebrate the Epiphany, God's light to come upon us, to shine upon us. For many people in the world, God's light is not shining well.

When Isaiah spoke these words, it was probably toward the end of seventy years of utter darkness for the people of God. Israel and Judah had been devastated, left in destitution by the Assyrian Army. "Utter darkness was over the land." Isaiah had spoken words like this on numerous occasions. "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light." I can imagine the people are getting tired of hearing this at this moment. "Isaiah, where's the light?" The darkness goes on and on and on.

There's a remnant in the land. There was continual civil strife among those who remained. There was a sense of ongoing destruction. Those left behind had very little means of self-support. They literally lived from hand to mouth. Seventy years of partisan strife, of living in the shadows, of a huge flood of a military might from Assyria that came pouring over the nation of Israel.

A huge flood came pouring out over the people in South Asia. The tsunami caused by a record-breaking earthquake has impacted millions of people. We have the opportunity to see this, up close and personal, because of the media. People that haven't been helped can be seen on television before they are helped in the devastation of their lives.

This text was written for such a people. The German theologian Claus Westermann, in his reflection on Isaiah 60, went into his own memories as a young German boy growing up during and just after World War II. Reflecting on the immense desolation, destitution, and destruction of his country, he speaks thankfully of the nations of the world who did not take vengeance upon the German people, but came up with a plan to help them rebuild and renew their lives. He uses that as the illustration for the people who walked in darkness, but have seen a great light. The light comes from the nations of the world to rebuild people who are in utter darkness.

The most striking image for me this past week was the sheer grayness of the debris, the remnants of what is left after the trees are mowed down, all vegetation wiped out, and everything that has been built by human hands decimated. Debris everywhere, cars on top of cars, boats imbedded in the sides of buildings. It's in that context that the voice of the prophet says, "Arise and shine, for your light has come."

How can this be, how can people have the courage to be able to rise and shine when their lives have been wiped out? Darkness is not just physical, but also experienced: the unexpectedness of the event, the surprise, the randomness, the pervasiveness. Darkness everywhere. The devastation, the chaos, the confusion and the disorder.

One of the poignant sights is the store owners, whose little stores have been wiped out by the flood. Piece by piece, they put things back on the shelves. Item by item, they clean them off so the colors begin to show again. "Arise and shine." Your light has come. How can this be in the midst of such fragility and meaninglessness? I think the universality hits all of us. One of the reasons there is such an immense response is many of us know we could easily be there ourselves.

The tsunami in the Indian Ocean has caused this terrible destruction but it has also caused a world awareness, a focus of intervention. This is the opportunity for humanity to pour out generosity upon people who are really in a lot of trouble. That is what Isaiah is saying will happen to the people of God -- humanity will pour out abundance and generosity upon people who have been destitute. In an irony of imagery, Isaiah uses the example of a flood, a sea of wealth, will be poured on the people who have gone through the darkness. I believe that is what will happen to the people of the twelve nations that have been devastated: a generous outpouring of grace to those in grief and in pain. "Arise and shine." We can hear the call across the world for there are people who are lost in darkness.

My father used to come and use those words about 6 a.m. in wintertime. I wasn't much interested in responding to that. "Arise and shine." And I'm thinking to myself, "Why should I? It's dark outside." But somehow, there's an inner motivation that takes over when you hear those words. There are things to be done, life to be lived. Get up and go.

Where does that inner motivation come from in the midst of darkness? It comes from a sense of how life has been given meaning -- in faith, in love and in caring. When we are robbed of that meaning, where does our motivation come from? It comes from people who still believe that there is life to be lived because they have experienced life beyond the darkness and the doom.

I have a cat by the name of Simba who loves to bask in the sunlight. Simba, after sleeping most of the night in the darkness, will come stumbling out and look to see if there is a light shining in the house or outside. And when he finds a beam of light, he will literally stand in it, lift his whole body up to, his nostrils and his face. And he will close his eyes and soak up the warmth and the light. "Arise and shine." That only works if there is an outside light. We who have faith in the living God believe there is an outside light that we can soak up, that we can receive in the midst of the darkness. That outside light gives us a sense of inner purpose and meaning when darkness prevails.

"The light has come," the scripture says. We understand that light to be Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. That light that has come into the world to bring light to all people. Even the Magi who were from Persia, probably from Southeast Asia, understood that there was a star that existed beyond the star they saw on the horizon inviting them to Bethlehem. Those Magi would normally have been considered by the people of God to be idolatrous, to be a part of the unacceptable people. Don't pay them any time, or any attention, don't do anything for them because they are the riffraff of the world. They are pagans, the heathens. But what I think God is saying here, and so well in Matthew, is that the light of God will shine so brightly that even people who do not have an experience of God, who come from astrology and idolatry, will be attracted to the light that exists beyond the lights. Because everyone wants to see light. People know when they are in darkness, and they hunger to have of sense of light in their lives.

But Isaiah goes one step further to say the light has come. He is saying to the people of God that the wealth of the world will come to them. At this moment of time, the wealth of the world is pouring out upon those who have lost everything around the Indian Ocean: those who bring gold, those who bring the means to make things clean again. Those who bring timbers and building structures, those who bring wealth to finance the rebuilding process that will need to happen over an extended period of time. Grace will show itself in concrete ways, because that is the way God is.

God is not just a god who enlightens our spirits; God is a god who rebuilds our homes, our lives, and our structures. So we participate in organizations around the world that bring relief to people who have lost everything. The Presbyterian Church brings relief in a crisis moment through One Great Hour of Sharing and through a special offering today. We participate with organizations like World Relief, World Vision, the Red Cross, because they will rebuild people who have lost everything and live in darkness. But it is important that the transformation taking place is not one just of the exterior. It's not just light that brings the new building process; it is a light that will change people's lives from the inside out. For that is what we believe as followers of Jesus Christ: that while lives are being helped, there is someone who speaks a word of grace to their hearts and their souls. And they believe that the God, who exists to create heaven and earth, exists to love them and care for them to the depth of their being.

We pray for those who come to the light, that they will engage the light personally. It is this change that we look for and one of the reasons that we invest so much in the lives of those around us. We know that you can change the exterior patterns of someone's life but if hearts and patterns of life don't change, that person will still live in an inner darkness.

Beyond the star the Magi saw is a star that shines in eternity. It is Jesus the Christ. Matthew does a fascinating thing with this light of the world. Not only do the Magi come and worship the light in the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem, but the Magi give gifts of their wealth. They pour out wealth upon this child who is destitute, from an itinerant family that now must be driven into Egypt without the kind of provisions that will help the child survive. The Magi's financing of that make for a great opportunity for the very nature of God to be saved by the wealth of nations. Jesus turns that around and says to his followers him, "You are the light of world." If you follow me, you become the light of the world; so let your light shine. Arise and shine, for your light has come.

Then we see at the end of the gospel of Matthew how this plays out in history. How this can be played out in terms of the conflagration and destitution in South Asia. For at the end of the gospel of Matthew, people would say, "Lord, you've invited us into heaven but when did we ever see you," and Jesus will say, "You saw me because I was hungry and you fed me. You saw me when I was thirsty and you gave me water. You saw me when I was in a place of captivity, and you gave me freedom, and you came to visit me. You saw me when I was sick, and you cared for me."

The light of God shines through the people of God, who bring intervention to human beings who are destitute and hurting. That's how people know that God is present in this world; because people see the manifest grace of Jesus and the love of God that pours out through intervention and everyday circumstances because people care. If you claim Jesus Christ is the light of your life, then step up and put your wealth and your body and your gifts where your words are. Because you are the light of the world, arise and shine; and invest in people that are hurting.

In the midst of the story of the tsunami, the front page of the *Post* carried the story of Dale Sanders, a missionary in Sri Lanka. Dale developed an orphanage for children who were orphaned from the civil war, the Sri Lankan battleground between families and tribes. These children were threatened by the tsunami coming. At the right moment, he heard that the ocean was coming toward them. He got all of his orphan children into a boat and by the grace of God the boat motor started at the immediate yank of the rope. They took off and barely made it out before the wave. In his faith when he saw the wave coming to overwhelm the boat, he said to the wave, like Jesus did, "Stop in the name of Jesus." He swears, according to the news report, that the water stopped just for a little while. We don't know about the miracle, but we do know this: that his faithfulness and his grace, his life, in practical ways, in the name of Christ, intervened for children who were preserved in the face of the big wave.

Many were not so privileged to have that happen to them. They can see the light of Jesus Christ in the wake of all the death and darkness. They can see your light if you are willing to give. They can see the light of the world if the people of the nations are willing to pour their wealth into their lives. We can pray that they might attach that great act of generosity to the God who creates all things and makes himself known in Jesus Christ. Arise and shine, your light has come. Amen.