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Text: Isaiah 60:1-6

Preached at Trinity CRC

January 7, 2018 – Epiphany Sunday

Let's stay standing for the reading of God's Word.

Hear now the Word of the Lord from Isaiah 60:

“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

“Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.
Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

You may be seated.

Today we observe Epiphany.

Epiphany comes from a word that means “manifestation” or “appearance.”

It is the celebration of God appearing to us in Jesus Christ...

Jesus Christ making God known to humans.

In the history of the church, Epiphany was actually more important than Christmas...

And it has been celebrated longer than Christmas.

Instead of simply being the anniversary of Christ's birth (our Christmas celebration)...

Epiphany celebrates and points to the whole purpose of Christ's coming:

The manifestation of God in Jesus Christ (James White, *Intro to Christian Worship*);

The vision of God's glory to the nations of the world (*Worship Sourcebook*).

So that's what we'll be looking at this morning:

The Lord shining the light of his glory on us...

Not only on us, but on the whole world.

Moving to Alberta has been quite a change for me and Kristi.

One of the differences is the sunshine.

We come from regions of the States where the sun is not as plentiful.

Seattle is especially known for its gray, dreary weather.

In the winter months, not only does the sun set early...

But the hours of daylight are filled with gray.

Back in 2016, Seattle went from October to late March with only 9 sunny days.

9 days of 30% or more of sunshine in more than 5 months!

There's a heavy layer of dark gray clouds that settles over the region.

Life becomes gloomy...

Life becomes depressing...

This is how I picture the captives coming back to Jerusalem after Babylonian captivity.

Not so much a lack of sunshine...

But the dark, gloomy, depressing conditions of returning from exile.

It's thought that our passage this morning was written shortly after the Israelites came back to Jerusalem.

See, they were forced to live in Babylon, hundreds of miles from Jerusalem...

Forced to live in Babylon for 70 years...

But then they're released and allowed to return home.

What they come back to though is not a pristine city...

They don't come back to a Jerusalem with new roads and sewers...

A city with new cell phone towers and thriving business...

They don't come back to subdivisions with new, ready-to-move-in homes...

Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians...

The Temple was demolished...

Their homes most likely were piles of rubble.

Picture the people of Iraq coming back to the city of Mosul...

The 2nd largest city in Iraq.

Mosul was the headquarters of ISIS.

For three years ISIS controlled the city.

It was the site of bombings, violence and destruction.

And now after being freed from ISIS...

People are beginning to come back to Mosul.

There is joy in being able to return, but things are not the same....

Homes, mosques, businesses, and infrastructure are destroyed...

They now live with the memory of the violence:

The rapes...

The torture...

The murder...

They're home, yes, but conditions are not great.

The exiles returning to Jerusalem have a dark cloud over them.

They too share memories of what life was like away from home...

They live with the trauma of seeing loved ones killed...

And living life in fear in a foreign land.

It feels good to be home, I'm sure...

Back in Jerusalem...

The city of God...

But there is much to grieve...

They cannot see past their present circumstances...

We can imagine worry, like a wet Seattle chill, settling deep into their bones...

We can imagine hope struggling in darkness. (Christine Yoder, *Working Preacher*)

This is an extended period of cloud cover and gloom for the Israelites who returned.

OT scholar Walter Brueggemann says, "What is most needed [in these hopeless situations], is what's most unacceptable—words that redefine the situation and make way for new gifts about to be given."

So what Isaiah does is redefine their situation.

He says,

"Arise! Shine! For your light has come!"

"...the glory of the Lord rises upon you!"

This is bright light penetrating through thick clouds of darkness.

God indeed is still faithful to his people...

Remembering his covenant for a thousand generations.

Yes, he sent them into exile because of their sin...

But now God has brought them back to the land...

Back home to Jerusalem...

And he has brought them back with a promise:

"...the abundance of the sea will be turned to you,"

"the wealth of nations will come to you."

There is a great reversal going on here.

Israel has been at the mercy of foreign powers for decades...

Forced to pay taxes and tributes to Babylon...

Forced to live under Babylon's economic and political system.

But now God is saying that things are about to change...

Instead the nations will bring their treasures to you!

“A multitude of camels will cover you...they will bring gold and frankincense...”

Gifts suitable for a royal people...

For God's people.

Isaiah is redefining Israel's situation.

He's giving them language of hope.

He's inviting them to trust once again in their God.

To trust in their God who has always been their help.

They did not do anything to deserve this blessing from the Lord...

Rather it's God's faithfulness to these people that drives the Lord's love.

These people do not have anything to offer...

They are not able to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps...

They have no light to shine.

This is a people in need...

Dependent on the Lord of all creation.

And aren't we the same dependent people?

The same people living under a cloud of thick gloom?

Yes, this is sunny Alberta...

But darkness comes over us all.

We all suffer from the brokenness of sin:

As our bodies age, and we become more fragile, we suffer brokenness...

Our relationships struggle under the weight of sin and endless cycles of fighting...

Our minds go down dangerous roads that lead to sin...

We all walk in darkness.

Briefly, let's look at two situations where people may be experiencing this darkness...

First, depression.

For some of us the darkness of depression is our reality.

If you don't have depression and don't know anyone with it, listen to some of these reflections (http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/danny-baker/depression_b_5267263.html):

“It's like being stuck in a box that you can't get out of--a very dark place where you feel so low that even simple tasks are difficult. You feel completely alone.”

“It's like drowning ... except you can see everyone around you breathing.”

“Depression is a dark, inescapable place. It's like being locked in a room with no light, windows or door. It's so dark you can't even see your hands in front of your face let alone find a way out.”

“Depression is waking up wishing you'd died in your sleep.”

Sounds pretty dark and hopeless doesn't it?

Another situation that many people in this city are going through is integration.

If you are a refugee being resettled in Edmonton you have your own struggles...

Many of these people are like the Israelite exiles who experienced violence and forcible displacement...

Except their home is no longer a safe place to return.

They have memories of loved ones suffering...

Memories of how things used to be.

Now they are safe in Canada...

But they don't know the culture;

They don't know the language;

They aren't familiar with the climate;

They are often resettled away from extended family...alone.

Many come from refugee camps where it was dangerous to live a structured life...

Dangerous to have routines...

So they struggle working consistent schedules...

Slipping back into the survival mentality of the camps.

Isolated, lonely and afraid.

To these, and to all of us suffering in the brokenness of life...

God has words that redefine our situation:

“Your light has come. The glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

In Christ we see the fulfillment of this promise.

In Christ, God brings light into our darkness.

Just like God does for the returning exiles, God does for us...

He redefines our situation:

Where we once walked in darkness...

Groping around at walls in a dimly lit hallway, trying to find our way...

Now we've been given light.

“The glory of the Lord has risen upon us.”

In Christ, we have light and hope.

In Christ, we experience God's faithfulness.

The Lord has a jealous love for us.

No matter how many times we turn our back on him...

No matter how broken and messy our lives get...

No matter the clutches of depression, despair, loneliness, or bitterness...

The Lord still loves you....

And the Lord is still with you.

Walking alongside of you in your struggles.

In Christ he has made a way to be with us...

Gently and tenderly calling us his own.

Epiphany.

The manifestation of God in Jesus Christ.

In our Isaiah passage...

We see that God's glory and God's light is attracting people to himself:

The ones that come will bring “gold and frankincense, proclaiming the praise of the Lord.” (Isaiah 60:6)

But *we* also receive this call to Arise! And shine!

“Nations will come to *your* light.”

The glory of the Lord—

The light and shining splendor of the Lord—

Is given to his people.

The community of Israel is shimmering and radiant with light.

The rest of the world is walking around in darkness...

And they are attracted to the light.

They come from the farthest ends of the earth to the light of a transformed Israel.

As people of God Most High...

And disciples of Christ...

This is the light we've been given.

The light of Christ radiating out of our union with him.

We are invited to let this light shine into a dark, broken world.

We are invited to befriend the lonely.

To sit with those suffering under the cloud of depression...

To listen to them as they describe their darkness.

To ask for understanding of their reality.

We are invited to help the refugee settle in...

To go out of our way to strike up conversations with them...

Helping them to feel welcome.

Helping them to adjust to a new life away from all that is familiar.

We are invited to shine our light...

Shine our light so that they may one day proclaim the praise of the Lord.

One day knowing the loving embrace of Jesus Christ...

God appearing in flesh...

...The light of the world.

Epiphany.

The appearance of God as one of us.

His light has risen upon us...

His love is made known to us.

In Christ our darkness is made light.

And for this we say, "Thanks be to God."