

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Sunday Before Epiphany
January 4, 2004

“Your Light Has Come”
Isaiah 60:1-6; Galatians 3:1-13

First, let's get our bearings, and try to remember what time it is.
By the Roman calendar, it is January 4th,
that is, the 4th day of the month of Janus, the Roman god of gates and doorways.
We have passed through the doorway of a new year,
full of hope and resolution about the future.

But, necessary as it may be for us to use the Roman calendar,
so that we can function along with the rest of society,
our faith tradition invites us to mark time by a different calendar,
a calendar oriented around the life of Jesus Christ.
By the Christian calendar, we are already onto the 6th Sunday of the year,
having begun our new year on the First Sunday of Advent
(November 30th).

Today, on the church's calendar, it is the Second Sunday after Christmas,
and the Sunday before Epiphany.

Epiphany mean manifestation, showing forth,
and on Epiphany we celebrate God's manifestation in Jesus,
God's shining forth in Christ for all the world to see.
On Epiphany, we celebrate the mystery of God's eternal plan,
by which God reaches out beyond the chosen people of Israel,
to include ALL the nations and peoples of the earth
in the promise of salvation.

So, at Epiphany, we remember those first Gentiles in the gospel story,
the wise men who are drawn by the light of the star,
and who travel so far to see Jesus, to bring their gifts to him,
and to fall down before Jesus and worship him.

And on Epiphany, we read from the letter to the Ephesians,
and we hear the Apostle Paul talk about his divine commission
to make the good news known to the Gentiles,
that they, too, are *fellow heirs,*
members of the same body, and sharers in the promise...

This commission is given first to Paul,
then to the church, as Ephesians says, that
through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety
might now be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places,
in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is interesting here that at the end of this rather exuberant statement of his life's purpose, Paul makes reference to the fact that his mission to the Gentiles is exacting a price; it comes at a cost.

I pray therefore, writes Paul,

that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you;
(and some ancient manuscripts say, *I pray that I (I, Paul!) may not lose heart over my sufferings for you;*)
they are for your glory.

* * * * *

We can learn from Paul's purpose statement here in Ephesians, something about our own purpose, the purpose God intends for us in our lives.

But first we have to take a step back from Ephesians, further back in the canon of scripture, and further back in time, to that beautiful piece of prophetic poetry we have read today from Isaiah:
Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.

This text provides the historical and theological background for all that Paul is saying about God's salvation of the Gentiles, and about making all the people see God's plan, which was hidden through the ages, and about revealing God's wisdom to all the rulers and authorities. Paul is speaking out of a specific history, and a particular theology, and we find it here in Isaiah.

Isaiah points our eyes to the sky to behold the glorious light of God's coming, which, he prophesies, will draw all people and all nations together, not only wise men from the east, but all people from every direction, Jew and Gentile alike, coming in procession to bring their gifts to God at Zion, and to glorify God together in Zion, or Jerusalem, God's holy city.

Now this part of the book of Isaiah is technically called **Third Isaiah** and Third Isaiah is believed to have lived and prophesied in Jerusalem, in that time just after the Jews began to return to their homeland after many, long years of exile in Babylon.

Now in the middle part of the Book of Isaiah, the prophet we call Second Isaiah, has prophesied about this return of the exiles, this glorious restoration. And, much as he has predicted, Babylon has fallen to Persia, and the Persian King Cyrus has issued an edict that the Jews can return from exile to their homeland.

But unlike Second Isaiah's prediction,
this initial return of the exiles is quite a major disappointment.

The situation is not nearly as glorious as the people had hoped.

For one thing, not all of the Jews who had been exiled in Babylon want to return.

So the first group to return is very tiny – the merest trickle –

and when they arrive and begin to settle in,

they must suffer years of hardship, and deprivation, and insecurity.

They face a succession of poor seasons and crop failures,

which leave many of them destitute, without adequate food and clothing.

The work of rebuilding the Temple grinds to a halt before it really ever gets going.

And to make matters worse, the neighbors, especially the Samaritans,
are hostile to the returning exiles.

The people of Israel are faced with a spiritual emergency;

the morale of the community is dangerously low.

There is a real danger that the restoration might fail altogether.

Hopes have been pitched too high.

The glowing picture of the triumphant new exodus

and the establishment of God's universal rule in Zion

bears no resemblance to realities.

Hopes must be deferred. Resolutions broken. Celebration postponed.

The faithful cry out for God's intervention,

while some even begin to doubt God's power to act."ⁱ

Well, the return of the exiles may have been thousands of years ago,

but the experience is not really all that far away from us.

You know what it means to be disappointed in God.

When the moment of your life you've been waiting for finally comes,

and it turns out to be far less than what you'd imagined.

Perhaps you were hoping for a new job that would change your life for the better.

And you finally land it, but it only brings new stress, new problems, new worries.

Or maybe you thought a new love relationship would finally make you happy.

But now that you're into it, you see some painfully familiar patterns developing.

Or perhaps you were hoping that when our troops marched into Baghdad

the world would be ushered into a glorious new era of peace,

in which terrorism would finally be put down,

and all the nations would be drawn to the light of American freedom.

But here we sit, in a brand new year, living under "Code Orange", "Elevated Risk",

with a steadily growing list of dead American soldiers in Iraq.

Yes, we know all about hopes disappointed, dismal results, and harsh reality.

So, onto this grim scene comes Third Isaiah,

as if he's not even really paying attention,
preaching a word of exuberant hope and announcing good news.
He comes with a minority report, but he proclaims it without batting an eye.
He speaks as if the glory of Israel's restoration is already being accomplished,
it is already underway:

Arise, shine; your light has come

and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

God's glorious deliverance is soon to be realized.

Soon the light of God's coming will draw not only the rest of Israel's scattered exiles
to the holy city of Zion,

but ALL the kings and the nations will come, too.

No armed intervention will be needed.

The nations and the exiles will come to Jerusalem gladly, of their own free will.

They will see the light, know themselves to be in darkness, and they will come.

They will gather around the light that rises in Zion,

and they will bring their treasures with them, proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

The shame and sorrow of the recent past will be replaced with joy and prosperity.

At the dawn of God's glorious epiphany, there is no question about what to do,
you turn from the darkness and follow the light.

And when you find that light shining down on you,

then there is no question what to do, you shine with it.

The text of Isaiah is wonderfully ambiguous about this light: *Your light has come.*

Whose light is it?

God is the light. And God's people are given the light.

People are drawn to the light of God

when they see that light shining in God's people.

When the light is shining on us, it becomes our purpose, our mission, our calling
to rise up, and shine that light for others to see.

* * * * *

It is Isaiah's vision that must be in Paul's mind as he pushes forward,
with great persistence, in his mission to the Gentiles.

Even when his mission leads him to pay a high personal price,
he persists, because – well – he is focused.

His sufferings are not worth considering compared to the glory
of the good news that he has been given to proclaim.

To borrow a phrase from the recent best-seller,

Paul is living a "Purpose-Driven Life".

This is what Epiphany gives to us: it shows us our purpose in life.

Our purpose is to shine.

To shine with the light that we have received in Jesus Christ.

To look beyond our disappointment that life has not turned out the way we expected.

And instead to marvel at the mystery of God's eternal plan,

which turns our sufferings into glory,
and, in the process, draws all the peoples and all the nations to God's Light.

God's glory has been revealed to you in Jesus Christ.
But this revelation is not just about you,
it's about how you can now shine that light for others.
Bask in the light. But then *Arise, Shine!*
Shine YOUR light.
That is our purpose.
That is our resolution for this and every new year.

ⁱ John Bright, *A History of Israel, Third Edition*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) p 365-67.