

**Sunday, January 5, 2025**

**Morning Message:**

**Will you pray with me? Wise God, Light of Life, creator of all things, as you led the Wise Ones to Bethlehem, lead us to hear and understand your holy word. Fill our hearts and minds with your holy light, that we may be radiant beacons of faith and grace...**

**“Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the Lord’s glory has shone upon you...you will see and be radiant.” Just when we thought the last gifts had been given, unwrapped, and even perhaps exchanged or returned, I am here to share the great good news that the giving of gifts continues! The Light of Life that we sought and celebrated in Advent illuminates the path ahead in such a way that we recognize Christ and are moved to follow Christ. In turn, we strive to be the light that leads others to follow Christ. And as we do, we continue our own search for more light and more truth – both of which can be found through living life in Christ.**

**Today we celebrate Epiphany Sunday – the time we set aside to remember a particular part of the Christmas Story, that we celebrate at the end of the “Twelve Days of Christmas.” We remember the Wise Men who journeyed from afar in search of the Christ Child. An epiphany is a revelation, a sudden insight. It’s the light bulb that goes on when we finally “get” something. It’s that moment when an important truth or difficult concept finally becomes clear to us. From that moment, we are able to re-think our past, and then we are able to think about moving forward in a new way, in the light that comes with clearer thought. In the Epiphany, we remember the first revealing of Christ to the Gentiles, in the form of the Wise Men. For us, like them, the light we once only followed has been born within us, within our hearts.**

**Today, we seek to understand the meaning of this epiphany of light that the prophet Isaiah first describes, and what it means for us on our faith journey. To understand Isaiah’s words, we must consider the exiles from Judah as they waited in Babylon for the word that would send them home. Six hundred years before Christ, things seemed as dark as they had ever been, with little left to sustain the hopes of the Judeans. They were exiled from their land; the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed; and the dynasty of David had come to a disastrous end. In the midst of a people without land, temple, or leader, Isaiah describes the deep joy that they felt at the promise from King Cyrus of Persia that they could return to their land, and that lost sons and daughters would be gathered together again. Isaiah bids the people, “Arise, shine; for your light has come.”**

We are ending the Advent/Christmas season the way we began it – with words from Holy Scripture that encourage us to set aside fear. Here, Isaiah is challenging us to move out of the waiting of Advent darkness and beyond the mystery of Christmas dawning. Isaiah is challenging us to look up and out, and to go boldly into the brilliance of Epiphany’s bright day. “Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples,” Isaiah says in verse 2. Thick darkness is not new to the people whom Isaiah addresses in his day, nor is it unfamiliar to us in our day. The people to whom Isaiah was speaking dwelt in the thick darkness of Babylonian exile. Today, we dwell in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s version of darkness and exile. I don’t need to run down the list of what that thick darkness looks like and feels like for us, now do I? And even though it might be somewhat different for each of us, we can find reassurance in knowing that Isaiah voices what God knows – God knows just how thick the darkness in our world can get – whatever the sources of them are for each of us.

Yes, Isaiah acknowledges the darkness, but only to contrast it to the light that is coming into the world. Isaiah affirms the promise of light and abundance to a people drowning in despair. “Don’t give up! There may be deep darkness and destruction, but God’s light and healing will break through. Then you’ll be overwhelmed with joy at all that God will do for you,” Isaiah says. And this light that has come to Israel is not for them alone. “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (v. 3). Throughout the Old Testament and into the New, God used foreigners, outsiders, women, a child, a baby – the least expected and sometimes most unlikely characters to fulfill God’s will.

Epiphany reveals that even in Jesus’ infancy, he is for all humanity, not only for the chosen few. He is for the outsiders; he comes to draw people together: Wise Men from the East, Syrians from the north, Egyptians from the south, Romans from the west. The truth that grasps us in the moment of epiphany, the moment when Christ is revealed to the Gentiles, is that Jesus Christ is the very love of God incarnate, and that love cannot be confined to ethnic or national identity; it cannot be restricted by anything that might make us different from each other; it cannot be claimed only by the powerful and privileged.

When we gather to worship, we do so in the company of people from all nations, from all ages. Isaiah opens the window to something more that is going on: God is gathering the multitudes. As a worshipping community of faith, we represent something far beyond ourselves. We reflect one

part of the variety of all the people God means to gather together. Even as we gather here, in this separate place to worship the Lord, we are living into the promise that people of all nations will one day gather together to worship the Lord. Accepting our place in Isaiah's vision is satisfying – there is immense satisfaction to be found in knowing that we are part of something much greater than ourselves. It is uplifting to know that we belong to the multitude that includes the Wise Men, saints, martyrs, and faithful people of all generations. While it is exhilarating, embracing our place in Isaiah's vision can also be daunting and even disappointing, as we realize how much more we and our community of faith might be doing to bring about God's kingdom here on earth. But in those moments of doubt, I encourage you to think about all that this church does do for those in need, both in this community and in our world, and be encouraged, and inspired, and energized!

“Arise! Shine!” This is not just an invitation. It is a command! The light has not come merely to rescue a chosen few from darkness. The light has come so that others will be drawn out of the darkness and into the circle of light. “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (v. 3). Those who are privileged to stand in the light have a responsibility not just to receive the light, but also to respond to it. “Arise! Shine!” cries Isaiah, “You have the light...now show it! Get into that darkness and start shining!” Like the Wise Men, we have seen the light, have been forever changed for it, and are now called to go forward by a different way. Now that's a New Year's resolution! Happy New Year!

### **Invitation to Communion**

In Jesus Christ, God's promise that Israel will be a light to the nations is fulfilled. The expansive scope of God's love in Jesus Christ means that all are invited, all are included. God's grace reaches out and calls in every last one of God's beloved children who will come from every direction to worship God, to kneel before God's table, and to dine at the heavenly banquet to which our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ invites us. Come now to the Table...