

Isaiah 60:1-5 "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. <sup>2</sup> See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. <sup>3</sup> Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. <sup>4</sup> "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 arm. <sup>5</sup> Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy..."

Dear People of God Living in the Brilliant Light of Jesus:

Over the holidays my family & I watched a movie on DVD called "*The Finest Hours.*" It's about what has been touted the greatest Coast Guard rescue ever accomplished (1952). A tiny Coast Guard cutter carried to safety over 30 crew members of a tanker ship that split in half during a storm off of Cape Cod. The cutter lost its radio communications and compass, and the power on shore was knocked out so there were no lights to guide them to land. But finally the overloaded boat was able to find the shore because the townsfolk parked their cars with lights on shining out to sea. The crew saw the car lights and made it home safely.

A ray of light shining in a dark place can be very welcoming and reassuring. Isaiah uses that picture today as we think about this Epiphany theme: "*Your Light Has Come*" (I) *To Shine Through the Thick Darkness* (II) *To Make Our Hearts Throb with Joy.*

## I

"*Arise, shine!*" God says to his people. His words are like an alarm clock or a trumpet playing reveille: "*Wake up!*" God's people were having a rough go of it because of their obstinate sin and rejection of his Word. They didn't want to listen to God. They wanted to do their own thing their own way. Isaiah had warned them about the impending doom that would come because of it: the defeat of their nation and captivity by foreign forces.

Things weren't just dark for Israel. God pictures the whole world as a very dark place: "*See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.*" We can see spiritual darkness all around us...

- ...In the **world**: terrorists persist in preying on the weak and defenseless: mowing people down with trucks, shooting people in crowded buildings, and using women and children as shields and slaves. It's a cloud of horrible darkness cause by a complete lack of respect for life.
- ...In our **nation**: Opioid drug overdoses killed 33,000 people in 2015, quadrupling the amount of deaths recorded 15 years earlier. In Chicago 762 people were murdered last year. That's more people than soldiers who died from enemy fire in the Spanish-American War in the 1890s.
- ...In our **churches**: Only 3% of Americans in the 1950s claimed no religion. Now that figure is 21%. Those who attend worship is now at 36%, down from 41% just a few decades ago.
- But the most frightening place to look for evidence of darkness is within **me**...in each one of us! We try to tell ourselves we are basically good people, but our consciences scream at us: Guilty! My unkind, judgmental thoughts! My arrogance in thinking my way is always best or that my opinion is better! My impatient words! My complaining attitude! My self-centered decisions! "*Thick darkness*" is over me and in me and destroying me!

But God proclaims, "*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you...his glory appears over you.*" "Get up!" he says. "Put aside your sadness and fears and troubled hearts...and rejoice!" The darkness of ignorance and sin and eternal death has been pierced by the light of knowledge and hope and life. Jesus is the Light shining in our dark world and our own sinful, dark hearts. He was the Child born to enlighten minds and give us bright futures. He is our

“mulligan,” our “do-over” in life. The horrible sins you and I commit were never once committed by Jesus. The good things we should do but don’t were always done by him. Then God accepted his perfect life as a substitute for our foul, repulsive lives.

This is the beautiful truth: No matter how dark (spiritually, physically, or emotionally) the world seems, God promises the light of Jesus will never stop shining on you. Spiritually speaking, you are living in the Land of the Midnight Sun, like folks in near the Arctic Circle in the summer. **“Your light has come,”** and he, Jesus, is not going anywhere. He loves you! He’s just going to keep on shining on you!

## II

But it’s important to remember he doesn’t love *just* you. He loves everyone. He wants every soul to come to his light. **“Nations will come to your light...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 arm. Then you will look and be radiant; your heart will throb and swell with joy!”** Like the lights of a small town football field can be seen shining from miles away in the darkness of an autumn Friday night, many will come to the Gospel’s light in our sin-darkened world.

This is truly the Epiphany -- when someone trapped inside the dungeon of the darkness of sin and death comes to see the shining glory of Jesus Christ as Savior. This is what happened to the Magi when they visited child Jesus. This is what happened to you and me when our parents brought us to the Baptismal font and the Holy Spirit visited our hearts creating faith in Jesus.

And when this takes place in the lives of others, it fills us with great joy! **“You will look and be radiant; your heart will throb and swell with joy!”** Think how our hearts would **throb** with joy if, for example, many Muslims would hear about Jesus’ forgiving love and come to faith in him as Savior -- or Hindus or agnostics or atheists! This would be the answer to many prayers.

What is your part in making this joy happen? **You are the shepherds** who heard the good news about the Messiah’s birth and just had to go tell someone else. **You are the Magi** who followed the light and brought their gifts so that God’s work might be done. **You are the angels** who joyfully and boldly proclaim the Savior’s birth to anyone who will listen.

The work of the saving of souls does not usually take place by the 1000s as it once did on the day of Pentecost. It typically takes place one priceless soul at a time. Spiritual darkness turns to light as caring Christians like you reach out to friends and neighbors and family members who are confused or hurting or afraid or feeling crushed and vulnerable -- providing an open door and perfect opportunity for you to explain to them about the Child of Bethlehem who was born for them. And when that little spark of faith ignites inside them by the power of the Holy Spirit, I guarantee you that **“your heart will throb and swell with joy.”** The spiritual re-birth of a human being makes even the angels in heaven sing for joy!

On Epiphany, Jan. 6<sup>th</sup>, families in Latin America often open gifts. They call it **“El Dia de Reyes”** (The Day of Kings) the kings or wise men/magi who brought their gifts to Jesus. But the greatest gift you and I can ever bring to others is Jesus himself -- the Light of the World -- who pierces the darkness and guides us home!

Amen.