*EPIPHANY GLORY: IT’S GOOD FOR YOU*

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

January 2, 2022

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (v. 1)

Arise. Shine. Light. Glory.

Glory. What’s this about glory? The prophet Isaiah tells us that “the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” We want glory, sure, but it’s not as clear as daylight what it really is.

Glory is majestic beauty and splendor, such as the glory of bright stars on a crystal-clear winter night. We say that we give someone glory for producing a gorgeous work of art, or music, or something like that. We sometimes experience glory as a bright and powerful light, such as when shepherds were living in fields around Bethlehem, and “an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear” (Lk. 2:9).

But the simplest and clearest definition of glory is offered by Christian author Frederick Buechner: Glory is *God’s style*. When the Bible tells us that “the heavens are telling the glory of God” in Psalm 19, it is saying that the heavens are revealing God’s style: sunsets, starry nights, dust storms, rainforests, garter snakes, the human face – all, says Buechner, are “unmistakably the work of a single hand.” God’s style.

Epiphany. Do you remember what the word means? Epiphany is a flashing, suddenly, stunningly clear-- might we say ‘glorious’ -- realization of some particular thing. ‘I had an epiphany the other day,’ right? In our case, it’s ripping, clarified realization that Jesus, the human Jesus, the baby Jesus in the cattle trough, is the Christ of Almighty God.

This coming Thursday is the Day of Epiphany; so this is Epiphany Sunday. We celebrate, you and I, we celebrate that God’s style was revealed to the world when the wise men made their visit to the child Jesus. Matthew tells us that they followed a bright star to Bethlehem, and on entering the house (you see, he’s no longer in the manger in the cattle barn. He’s in a house. And Herod’s decree that male children 2 and younger be killed means that he may have been two years old by then. Well, “on entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid Him homage” – they gave Him glory. The wise men were the first to see that Jesus reveals the grace and love of God to the world in a bight and unmistakable way. He is a child who grows up to show God’s style in everything He says and does.

So Epiphany is all about the glory of God’s being revealed to the world. **B**ut what is the *effect* of this glory on us? Light, beauty, splendor and style don’t mean much unless they have a positive effect.

***The Joy of Glory***

Research shows that glory is good for you. Being a fan of a sports team, in particular, can have positive effects. (Especially if you are a fan of the L.A. Dodgers.) According to The *Atlantic* magazine, a landmark 1976 study described fans’ tendency to embrace a winning team as “basking in reflected glory” – the key is having an experience of “glory.”

Researchers found that after a win, fans were more likely than usual to wear hats and shirts connected to the winning team. They claimed credit for the team’s success through the pronouns they used in conversation, describing the team as “we” instead of “they” – as in “we are the champions!” In addition, research has found that sports fans tend to remember victories much more clearly than they remember defeats.

Studies show that being a fan of a sports team can ward off depression and feelings of alienation. (Unless you are a fan of the Chicago Cubs.) Rooting for the home team can build a sense of belonging and self-worth. Much of this is due to the strong bonds that develop among fans, but sports worship also provides individuals with strategies for overcoming emotional challenges. Good things come from “basking in reflected glory.”

Isaiah was writing to God’s people in a time of deep darkness, one that was even gloomier than a January night. By darkness, he means’ oof course, a spiritual and emotional darkness; almost a nationwide depression. He promised that although thick darkness was covering the people, something good was about to happen: “The Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you” (v. 2).

Yes, Israel’s situation was very much like a football team that’s down six points with three seconds on the clock. But God tells Israel to look for a Hail Mary pass and a two-point conversion! Glory!

Of course, we know that God did not enter human life as a quarterback with a golden arm. God appeared as a vulnerable baby, with a mother and a father on the run from evil King Herod. Isaiah sensed how God was going to come to earth, which is why he said, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (v. 3). We think of these words when we sing “We Three Kings,” right?

Isaiah knew that these visitors would “bring gold and frankincense” and “proclaim the praise of the Lord” (v. 6). We remember these words when we sing, “born a king of Bethlehem’s plain/ Gold I bring to crown him again . . . . Frankincense to offer have I/ incense owns a Deity nigh.” The words of Isaiah come together with one of our favorite carols to help us bask in the reflected glory of Jesus, the baby of Bethlehem – a child who is the clearest possible example of God’s style.

***The Light of the World***

But what happens to *us* when we experience this glory? What happened is that we discover that *Jesus is the light of the world*. As the light of the world, Jesus –

* Drives away sin, isolation and despair.
* -Gives us the gift of forgiveness.
* Gives us the gift of Christian connection.
* Gives us the promise of eternal life.

Changes our attitude to the world around us, and

* Invites you and me into the reign of God.

Epiphany invites us to remember the coming of the light of Christ into the world, a light that d**rives away the darkness of sin, isolation, and despair**. With Christ, we have the **gift of forgiveness** whenever we fall into destructive behavior or wander into dark ways of life. With Jesus, we have **the gift of Christian connection** – with Christ and with each other – whenever we become isolated or alienated from others.

Jesus also **gives us the promise of everlasting life**, which can ward off depression and despair. “You shall see and be radiant,” promises Isaiah; “your heart shall thrill and rejoice” (v. 5). When the light of Christ illuminates your life and mine, we realize that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39).

But Christ’s light does more than make us feel good. It also changes our attitude toward the world around us. In the early 1960s the Christian author CS Lewis said to the Oxford Socratic Club, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

Jesus helps us to see the world in a new light, one that reveals that the people around us are not enemies or opponents. They are human beings made in the image and likeness of God. The light of Christ gives us strategies for navigating challenges, such as forgiving instead of punishing, and working for the common good instead of our narrow self-interest. Jesus invites you and me to see ourselves not as members of a particular family or community or nation, but as citizens of the glorious kingdom of God.

“Jesus invites us into the reign of God,” says Episcopal priest Peter Wallace. This is the eternal kingdom “that encourages and provokes authenticity, that calls us to become fully human beings before the face of God.” When you and I walk in the glory of the light of Christ, we discover that the goal of our lives is not to earn the most money, win the most awards, close the most deals or accumulate the most possessions. Instead, it is to be the authentic men and women that God created us to be. The goal of our lives is to be full human beings, standing in the presence of our loving Lord.

***Arise and Shine***

Now, belatedly, the first pair of words: *Arise* and *shine*. Here is the “Now what?” part of this message – the call to action. Now what do we do?

When we experience the light of God and are covered with the glory of God, *we cannot help put arise and shine.*

Return to the sports scene now, for example. You’re watching your team – be specific, now. Yes, even the Colts – with friends. You all have sodas in your hands and popcorn in your laps. Seconds are ticking. Time is running out.

Then suddenly, inexplicably, against all odds, on the final play, somebody begins to run from his own 8 yard line. He reaches the 25, and then, with a head and shoulder fake, he’s at the 30. He zigs and he zags. He eludes a tackle, and cuts in the opposite direction and makes it to the 40. Seeing an opening, he scoots to the 50, and then it’s a foot race to end zone 50 yards away.

Only one defender can possibly reach him. The question is whether your guy still has gas in the tank. It’s going to be close. And then at the 3 yard line, less than 10 feet from the goal line, he trips. Sensing that he’s going down, he uses one leg to leap forward, stretching high and long, the football in his hands. He falls on the goal line with his arms and hands stretched out . . . and the ball is in the end zone.

Here is the pertinent question: *At what point of this 92 yard run did you arise and shine*?

Nobody, no true fan, could watch this without standing up and hollering. Impossible. No person could fail to leap to their feet and start screaming at the television – an inanimate object!

When the glory of the Lord is upon us, there’s no way we are sitting on our hands. Truth is, popcorn’s going to be all over the place. We will shout from the housetops.

God has come to us. Our salvation is here!

So arise and shine! The light and glory of God are upon us!

Amen.