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The Epiphany of our Lord
January 6, 2008
Isaiah 60:1-6

“Get Up and Glow!”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

“On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me ...” Yes, it is to that day that we have arrived. Much of the world has pretty well forgotten about Christmas already. The trees lie on the lawns of many homes. The lights are coming down or are turned off. I walked through Mayfair Mall the other day and there was very little evidence there of the Christmas shopping season. But this day gives us an opportunity to light the candles one more time, to enjoy the lights of the trees and the other decorations. For as happens about every six years, the calendar has permitted us this Sunday (weekend) to celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord on the actual day, January 6th, the twelfth day of Christmas.

Our theme for today is “Get Up and Glow!” Now that should get your attention. The very name of the day has something to do with this theme. The word Epiphany comes from a Greek word, epiphane, which means to shine forth or shine out. It is a word associated with seeing and appearances. It is a word that has in its root the word for light, phos. But our theme is really a modern rendering of the words of our text this morning, words which come from the Old Testament Lesson for today. So, are you ready to “Get Up and Glow?”

I. The Text

Isaiah wrote these words at a dark time for the people of God. It was not apparent to them that there was any cause for joy. Yet the prophet says, “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” These are words of faith and promise. In spite of appearances, the glory of the Lord has risen upon them. Now to whom does the prophet address these words. It is interesting that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament from two centuries before Christ has these words, “Shine, shine, Jerusalem, for your light has come.” Most commentators agree that these words speak to Zion or the holy city personified. It is there that the light of God would come.

It is also necessary though to see the contrast. The contrast is between the light and the darkness. “For darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.” This is a striking illustration of the power of sin and death over the world. In recent weeks the world has been shocked at the images of the assassination of the Pakistani leader Bhutto and the violence it engendered. There are other evidences of the darkness of evil and sin all around us. And that is how it is in all our lives if we depend upon ourselves. For the darkness would appear to overpower the light. But that is not how it really is. The verses that follow in this prophecy show that the light will spread. It will encompass the nations. “Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” It is here that we see the first

reference which has been linked to Epiphany. "Kings will come to the brightness of your dawn." Indeed it is from this passage that we have the familiar Epiphany carol, "We three kings from Orient are." For the account in St. Matthew's Gospel speaks not of kings but of magi (wise men). But the idea that they were kings comes from this word of Isaiah.

The closing verses of this prophecy speak of the riches of the nations. And most assuredly also the Epiphany visit of the wise men is referred to. "Herds of camels will cover your land ... And all from Sheba will come bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord." Here indeed is a foreshadowing of the gifts and adoration of the Magi, who upon seeing the young child with his mother bowed down in worship and offered their gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. And so the light shines. In fact, it glows with the glory of God.

II. How Do We Glow?

But this brings us to an important question. If the command of the Lord is to Get Up and Glow, how is that possible? Well, we cannot even get up by ourselves. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to do that. When you looked at yourself in the mirror this morning, were you glowing? The only way that can occur is when we glow with the Lord's own light. It is one of the paradoxes of the Gospel story that while it was the light of a star that led the wise men to the infant Jesus, He was truly the light. Scripture is full of Bible passages that refer to that fact. St. John writes, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not comprehend it." Jesus Himself said, "I am the light of the world, he who believes in me does not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." The Scripture is full of descriptions of Jesus Christ the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. With that assurance it is clear as our text reminds us that we can only glow when we are enlightened by the glory of God. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The Epiphany season is most certainly one of the times in the church year when we see that light of God. It is seen in the words and works of Jesus. This year, the year of Matthew, we will have more of an emphasis on the words and teachings of Jesus, but the light shines there as well. This season of the church year is also highlighted by the Baptism of our Lord at the beginning (next week) and the Transfiguration of our Lord at the end of Epiphany which because of the early date of Easter this year is just a few weeks away. In each of these occurrences we are reminded of the promise of the Father in the glory of the Son, "You are My Son whom I love."

And so for each of us we are constantly reminded that Jesus Christ is the source of the light. He is the light. He brings salvation and peace and joy to our hearts in the assurance that we are his eternally and that nothing can separate us from His love.

III. Glow!

With this understanding then, it is clear that we can glow. Even as the prophet proclaims: Arise, shine, for your light has come. Or, get up and glow! We do this as we become beacons for the dark world around us. We glow when we share. One of the themes throughout the years for Epiphany has been missions. That is most appropriate. Epiphany is sometimes known as the Gentile Christmas for the visit of the wise men. It also can be seen in the words of the text that nations will come to your light. All the peoples of the world need to hear and know of this great gift of our Lord. All need to glow in that light alone. In this age in which we live there is a dangerous trend of thought going around which makes all religions alike and treats all as equally effective ways to God. This is not the message of Scripture. It is not the teaching of our Lord Jesus who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." It does not make the light clear but only darkens it.

You might say that it is hard to be a witness. You may be surprised at the ways you witness to your neighbors and to those whom you contact each day. The other important point to remember is though our glow may seem small and insignificant when it multiplied by many it lights up the world for it is only the reflected glow of the light of Christ. As the children's song says:

This little Gospel light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine. ...
Hide it under a bushel, no!
I'm gonna let it shine. ...
All around the neighborhood
I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, all the time, let it shine.

And that same message, expressed most simply in this familiar children's song, is also expressed most powerfully in the words of the hymn we sang just before the sermon. It is a hymn written by Philipp Nicolai, whom we have spoken of before. He wrote it in a time of great turmoil and disease and death. But he wrote of the great love of God in the Morning Star, the bright and glorious declaration of God's own love. For the Morning Star is not the star that led the wise men to the side of the child of Bethlehem. No, it is the Child himself, the incarnation of the Son of God in human flesh. The one who glows in us that we may glow in the world around us is the one to whom we sing:

O Morning Star, how fair and bright!
You shine with God's own truth and light,
Aglow with grace and mercy!
Of Jacob's race, King David's son,
Our Lord and master, you have won
Our hearts to serve you only!
Lowly, holy! Great and glorious, All victorious,

Rich in blessing, Rule and might o'er all possessing!

Oh, let the harps break forth in sound!
Our joy be all with music crowned
Our voices gaily blending
For Christ goes with us all the way—
Today, tomorrow, ev'ryday
His love is never ending!
Sing out! Ring out! Jubilation! Exultation!
Tell the story! Great is he, the King of Glory!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.