

Isaiah 60 – *Your light has come*

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

What does it mean to hear such a powerful prophecy about light when you live in deep darkness – a prophecy that radiates joy, consolation, and glory? It's a question I hear being asked these days. We look at our world and see the darkness wrought by war and hatred, by racism and bigotry. Where is the hope? Is there any?

Such questions were asked by the Israelites. They had known a long season of darkness, surviving the despair of exile in Babylon. Read the preceding two chapters to what we heard tonight, and we get a taste of the gloom and despondency that permeated their lives. And understandably, there's a yearning for light – a longing for the glory to come, but all they know is darkness. Now, in the 6th century BCE, the exiles finally return from Babylonian to Jerusalem. But it's not an idyllic scene to which they return.

Most of those returning to Judah from exile (to whom Isaiah 60 is addressed) have never lived in the land of their ancestors. Jerusalem is in ruins, the economic situation dire. Conflicts arise as the returnees drifted in, for the current occupants of the city aren't excited to welcome them back. The people of God find themselves in a place of shadow and struggle, even though they are back where they should feel at home.

The weary returnees need a vision like this as they begin the work of rebuilding the city, their temple, and their lives. They need hope as they process the trauma – generational trauma – of living through war, forced captivity, and loss of culture and home.

Enter Isaiah with this beautiful vision of light, hope, and prosperity. God's glory will appear over them, the prophet says, which in the parlance of the Hebrew Scriptures, means the very presence of God – God will shine on you! Nations will come to you! They will drop wealth at your doorstep! This is all very good news to the weary returnees.

Looking back on history, we can see that the prophecy wasn't fulfilled as described. The people do rebuild the city and the temple, but nations and kings don't appear out of nowhere to drop off their gold to finance the job or a caravan of camels to facilitate it. Instead, rebuilding is slow and tedious, and it happens despite enemies' efforts to stall the temple restoration. Yet God is still with them – God is still faithful.

What Isaiah presents is a vision of hope and restoration, not just for the people of Israel all those centuries ago, but for all of the nations, for all people, in all times. It offers timeless images of God's reign breaking into everything.

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This is one of those lines that can crystallize our faith. When hope is dim, it can be hard to see the divine light and know the presence of God, and perhaps, even to believe God is God. We too, in our places of despair, need the assurance, the reminder, that God is with us, that God will act, God will be known, even if it's not in the way that we expect.

Hope is a dynamic that enables us to see that the future doesn't need to be the same as either the past or the present. It propels us toward something new. It declares that what we experience now is not the only reality. It may be, such hope often requires some courage. As a wise commentator puts it, it's about 'trusting in God's good purposes even when the newspapers daily scream their evidence that sin rules the world, and evil rages unchecked.'

It's to John's Gospel I turn for an unqualified declaration of that hope. John proclaims, Jesus is the light – the light which 'shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' That's the hope we hold onto, for without it meaninglessness and despair take over. And such hope is meaningful, not because we're blind optimists, but because of who God is – God as proclaimed by Isaiah – and then, what is the ultimate fulfilment of that vision – God seen and experienced in Jesus. This is God who does break into our world and illuminates our existence. Look around, the prophet cries, and pay attention! God is here! Even though 'darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples... the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.' God's light is present, both hidden and revealed, even when we can't perceive it.

I'm not given to seeing rays of divine light shining out of nowhere – anymore than I expect God to send loads of gold or silver on camels. But what I've discovered is that God sends people into our lives that may well be bearers of light – bearers of God glory, God's presence. C. S. Lewis remarked, 'Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.' I rephrase it, 'Every Christian is to become a reflection of the light of Christ – a reflection of the glory of God. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.' ... I wonder how that may play out in our life this week, for perhaps, you and I could share in the fulfilling of Isaiah's prophecy.

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