

“Rise and Shine”

Based on Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

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Sunshine is a premium in Ohio during the winter. We can go for days, even weeks, without seeing the sun. You watch the news and the news anchor is prodding the weather forecaster to tell us, “When will there be any sun?” This guy I know was joking, “Partly cloudy means cloudy.” I don’t know about you but when the sun breaks through the clouds this time of year it immediately energizes me.

I remember a time several years back when I was sitting in my office at the church I was serving at the time. It was early February. I don’t believe the sun was seen for the entire month of January. That morning, through the blinds of my office window, I finally saw sunlight. It was so bright! It was so good to see the sun. It lifted my spirits. To this day I still have a clear memory of that moment. To see the sun after being behind the clouds for a long time is a joyful experience.

It is in that spirit that we hear these words from the prophet, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” In a time of darkness and gloom, a time of oppression, of exile, of loss, the prophet offers a word of hope. Jerusalem was destroyed. There was no king from the line of David sitting on the throne. Much of Israel was living in exile in Babylon. Things were grim. But it would not always be that way. God will act. God will make things right. The glory of the Lord will rise again over Israel. There will be a restoration. For Israel there will be a new dawn. The prophet proclaims a word of hope. It is this hope for a brighter future that gives us the possibility to stand up and face our future. Without this hope, all is lost.

In an interview with the BBC, Martin Luther King said, “I have my moments of frustration, my moments of doubt, and maybe temporary moments of despair, but I have never faced absolute despair because I think if you face absolute despair, you lose all hope, you have no power to move and act, because you really feel there is no possibility of winning.” Hope is necessary to survive those tough times, those times

when everything is grey and cloudy, when nothing seems to be going right.

There is a basis for our hope...the God of hope. We know that God is with us. We know that God loves us. We know that God has provided for us the way of salvation, the promise of eternal life. We know that God keeps God's promises, that God's will will be accomplished, that God's reign of peace and justice will be established. Or, as someone else has said, "the arc is long but it bends toward justice." We know that love wins in the end. This is the source, the foundation, of our hope for the future. So we can respond to the words of the prophet. We can arise and shine for the glory of God is shining on us, at least in our hearts.

Today is called Epiphany, one of the first Christian holidays. It's been around longer than Christmas. When the church first started and for the first couple hundred years, there were only two major holy days: Easter and Epiphany. It used to be on Epiphany, and it still is among Eastern Orthodox Christians, for this to be a day of celebrating Jesus' birth, the visitation of the magi, and his baptism. Now, of course, these events are spread out. Today we remember the visitation of the magi and next Sunday we are going to remember Jesus' baptism.

When we talk about epiphany these days, it is when someone has an epiphany, an "a-ha" moment. It's when you suddenly "see the light." These epiphanies tend to spring up on us when we least expect it. Maybe that "a-ha" moment occurs when you are lying in bed in the middle of the night, or you are in the shower, or you are driving down the road, or something catches your eye. Whenever it is, something clicks, the dots are connected, and you suddenly see things in a new light. Things suddenly make sense. You have clarity.

That epiphany may provoke excitement, even joy. Say there was a question you were struggling with, and every answer you came up with didn't quite fit. But then someone asks the question in a different way and you get a completely different perspective. Then all of a sudden the answer to the question is right in front of you. Problem solved! But epiphanies may also provoke anxiety. It may trouble the waters. You were going along in life with no real problems. Then you have an experience that rocks your world. All of a sudden you realize that what

you thought you knew to be true was all wrong, that you had been living a lie. Now that will stir up some major conflict that will take a good deal of time to process. You can't go back to the way things were. You know too much now. You have to figure out how to move forward with integrity and that's a challenge.

An epiphany came upon Herod and the rest of Jerusalem when some astrologers from Persia showed up asking where the king of the Jews was so they could pay him homage. This came out of nowhere. For generations the people had been praying for, longing for, the day when Israel would have a king that was not appointed by Rome, a king from the line of David, who would be the messiah, the anointed one who would restore Israel to its glory and finally get Rome off their backs. And then, all of a sudden, it was happening! A king had been born and no one knew about it! How can this be? What do these astrologers from Persia know? Their presence has turned everything upside down.

We can understand why Herod was troubled over this news. He was already the king appointed by Rome. There can be only one king. So he knew that his rule was immediately under threat. So that was a problem for him. The people of Jerusalem were also fearful. Even though this was something they had been hoping for, when it is actually happening, this meant that Rome would take notice. And that meant a military assault to squash any rebellion in order to assert Roman control. The epiphany that the king of the Jews had been born did not signal a time of peace but a time of revolt. The waters were troubled by this news. Something had to be done, and, if we read further in Matthew's gospel, we know what the response from Herod was...the slaughter of innocent children while Jesus and his parents fled to Egypt for asylum.

So we get why Herod and the people of Jerusalem were fearful and upset. But why were the magi filled with joy? The scriptures read that when the magi saw the star stop over the place where the child lay that they were overcome with joy. Why? What did they know? It was not uncommon for dignitaries from other nations to go and see future heirs to the throne to pay homage. For the magi to go and pay homage to Jesus is not strange. But why would this be a joyful occasion? I don't see why the future king of the Jews would prompt them to be overcome with

joy. Maybe they were joyful because they were looking at the one who would restore Israel's sovereignty from Roman oppression. Maybe there was something about the star stopping that signaled to them that the royal line this baby represented would never end. Who knows for sure. But for whatever reason, the magi were overcome with joy as they paid homage to the child, presenting gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. For them, this epiphany prompted by the star that stopped, was a joyful experience.

I had a small epiphany recently when I prayed this prayer one morning a few days ago. The prayer began something like, "Each day is Christmas because we receive from you the gift of another day with Jesus." That's true. Each day is a gift. Every morning we get up we have another day to unwrap and enjoy. And it is true that Jesus is with us through the whole day. That is a good thing to appreciate. But what was the epiphany for me was the idea of beginning every day putting myself at the manger in simple adoration that God came to us in human flesh. We can remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus every morning. I guess we can't keep up the Christmas tree and holiday lights year round. But we don't have to only celebrate the birth of Jesus one day a year. We can celebrate that God is with us as a human being every day.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come." This is not a suggestion the prophet gives us. It's a command. It is as if your mom or dad is knocking on your door telling you to wake up, it's morning, time to get up and moving. Rise and shine! We are to get up from our beds of gloom and discouragement and to shine, to reflect the glory of the Lord that shines over us. What does this mean? How do we do this?

Part of it must be an act of will. We have to choose to rise and shine. In our times of discouragement, confusion, sorrow, despondency, we have to decide for ourselves to claim that God's glory is over us. We have to determine for ourselves that we are in the light of God. We have to decide for ourselves to walk in the light of God. We have to cling to the hope we have that God is with us and that God's grace is sufficient for this day. And then we just have to get up and go.

There is a story told by a missionary who was doing his ministry in India. One early morning, before the sun was up, he and a group of

others were walking up a hill, the top of which was a popular site for pilgrims to pray. As they got closer to the top of the hill, another group was going down the hill. The group that was going down was facing east. And as the sun was just coming up, the sunlight was reflected off the faces of those approaching them. This gave the missionary an epiphany: when we turn ourselves toward Christ, the one who is the light of the world, we will reflect the light of Christ out into the world.

We can't do anything about cloudy days in Ohio. There's not much we can do about the cloudy and dark times in which we live, with all that is happening in the world today. But we can rise and shine. We can daily return to the manger and pay homage to the Christ child, maybe with a little joy in our hearts as we simply adore him, Christ the Lord. And then as we move through the day with our eyes on Jesus, we can reflect the light of Jesus out into the world. We can let our little lights shine.

Let us pray.

As the magi knelt at the manger to adore the Christ child and offer gifts, so may we every morning simply adore you as our Christ and Lord. Shine your light upon us, O God, so that we might reflect your glory in the world so others may be drawn to your light. In the name of Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world, we pray. Amen.