

“Nations Will Come to Your Light”

I. Foretold by the Prophet

II. Fulfilled by the Magi

III. Celebrated by Believers

“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
² See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
³ Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
⁴ “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 hip.
⁵ Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
⁶ Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

Tell me, how would you feel if you found out that for all these years you and I have been celebrating Christmas on the wrong day? What if, instead of celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ on December 25th, we should be celebrating it 12 days later? Did you know that that long before the Christian Church set aside December 25th as the day to mark Jesus’ nativity, it was already celebrating the Lord’s Epiphany, a day on which the early church actually celebrated four events in Jesus’ life, namely, his birth, his baptism, the visit of the Magi, and his first miracle?

Well, over the course of time, the Christian church began to separate these various events in Jesus’ life into different celebrations. December 25th was chosen as the date to celebrate the birth of Jesus and commemorate his revelation to the Jews as represented by the shepherds of Bethlehem. The festival of Epiphany focused on Jesus as the savior of the Gentiles, as represented by the Magi from the East. For this reason, Epiphany is sometimes called the Gentile Christmas. In fact, in some parts of the world, there is more emphasis on Epiphany than there is on Christmas—which, if you think about it, wouldn’t necessarily be wrong, especially for a congregation like ours, where majority of us are likely not of Jewish descent.

But you realize, the idea that Jesus came for both Jews and Gentiles is not something that the Church Fathers decided back in the middle ages. It's something that God revealed in the pages of Holy Scripture. Long before a little Jewish baby was laid in a manger in the town of David, the Holy Spirit was talking about the impact that the birth of Jesus Christ would have on people of every race and nation and language. In fact, that's what we want to focus on today. We'll take as our theme words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The Nations Will Come to Your Light”

As we study God's holy word today, will see that that fact is something that was:

- I. Foretold by the Prophet
- II. Fulfilled by the Magi, and now,
- III. Celebrated by Believers

We turn our attention to the words of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 60. Now, when you heard these words read a few minutes ago, if your first reaction was, “What in the world is the prophet talking about?”, you're not alone. I felt the same way. But I was reminded of a quote by the ancient Church Father Augustine who once said, “the New Testament is hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is revealed in the New.” So let's study these words from the Old Testament, in light of what God tells us in the New Testament. Our text begins with the words, *“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples. But the Lord rises up on you and his glory appears over you.”*

In order to understand these words, maybe we should begin by asking a basic question like, “Who's talking here?” You maybe noticed that this passage begins with a quotation mark. That's not because Isaiah is talking. It's because Isaiah is recording what God himself is saying. And exactly who is God talking to or about? In other words, who is he referring to with the words, “Your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises upon you?” He's referring to the same people that he's directed this whole book toward, namely, the people of Israel—both the physical nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, but also the spiritual nation of Israel, those who believe the promises God made to Abraham, especially about the coming Messiah.

While a lot of this book contains warnings about the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity, Isaiah looks ahead to their return from captivity and beyond that, to the coming of the promised Messiah. It is that final event that Isaiah is referring to here in our text for today. In fact, Isaiah is so certain that it will happen, that he records it as if it already has happened. He says, *“Arise, shine for your light has come.”* He speaks of future events while using the past tense.

From there, goes on to draw a contrast between those living in the spiritual darkness of sin and unbelief that is so prevalent in the heathen nations of the world, versus the light which has come to shine on the people of Israel. Isaiah calls that light the Glory of the Lord. You maybe remember from Pastor Priebe's Christmas Day sermon, that the Glory of the Lord is the visible presence of God. In Old Testament times, the Glory of the Lord was often displayed in the form of smoke and fire, whether it was at the burning bush or on Mount Sinai or when it filled the Tabernacle, and later the temple to show that God was dwelling among his people. But after the temple was destroyed and rebuilt, the glory of the Lord did not enter the temple and the nation of Israel had to wait 400 years for God to make his presence known again. And when and how did that happen? It happened when God took on human flesh and revealed himself as a little Jewish baby laid in a manger. How did St. John describe that event? *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son,*

who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

My friends, that event, the coming of Jesus Christ as God in the flesh—that's what Isaiah is looking forward to. He sees it as the high point in the history of God's people Israel. In fact, didn't Simeon say the same thing? When Simeon had the chance to see baby Jesus and hold the child in his arms, what did he say about him? He called Jesus the "glory of God's people Israel. This is the culmination of God's promises. It's what the Jewish nation is best known for.

And yet, if you remember, that's not the only thing that Simeon said about the Christ child. His exact words of praise to God were these. "*Now my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations; a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.*" In other words, Simeon recognized that Jesus came not just as the glory of Israel. He also came as a light for the Gentiles. In fact, isn't that exactly what Isaiah said about the coming Messiah? "*Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*"

Oftentimes, when Scripture uses the term the "nations," or "the islands," or "the ends of the earth," he's referring to all the non-Jewish people of the world. Isaiah's point is this. When the Messiah comes to his people Israel, he's going to attract people from other nations, Gentiles, if you will. And of course, among the first Gentiles to see the light of the new Messiah were a group of ancient astronomers. Or to put it another way, that promise that Nations Will Come to Christ's Light" was not only foretold by the prophet, was also: II. Fulfilled by the Magi.

Isn't that right? The wise men who came looking for the king of the Jews because as they put it, "*We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him*"—those men were most likely not of Jewish descent themselves. They were from the distant country of Babylon. And yet somehow these men knew about God's promise of the Messiah. How could that be? Well, remember, the nation of Israel had spent time in Babylon during the Babylonian captivity. People like Daniel, and the three men in the fiery furnace and Queen Esther all rose to positions of prominence in Babylon and Persia. They undoubtedly had circles of influence. Could it be that the people in those countries came into contact with the religious writings that those Jewish believers held dear? Could it be that the Magi (who were into studying ancient texts) maybe came across Scripture passages like Numbers 24:17 which reads *A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.* When those same professional astronomers then saw an astronomical phenomenon in the sky, they must have concluded that it was a sign from God that that Old Testament prophecy had been fulfilled. And so what did they do? They travelled 500 miles to worship the one born king of the Jews. And they brought with them their costliest treasures of gold and frankincense and myrrh—all of which was in perfect fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy here in our text. *The wealth of the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. And again, all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD (Isaiah 60:6).*

Isn't that remarkable? 700 years before it happened, the prophet was already predicting that the one who was born King of the Jews would be worshipped by more than just the Jews – even if the Jews themselves had a little trouble comprehending that fact, including Jesus' own disciples. Remember how long it took for Simon Peter to get it right in his head? It was not until God sent Peter that vision of a sheet coming down from heaven, filled with all kinds of "unclean" animals that God commanded Peter to get up and eat—it was only then that Peter concluded that he was not to discriminate against people on the basis of their nationality. How did Peter put it? "*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right*" (Acts 10:34).

Even the Apostle Paul describes that as a mystery that God had to reveal to and through him. How does Paul put it in our epistle reading today? *The mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together of the promise in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 3:6).* What the Apostle Paul carried out in his ministry to bring the good news of a Savior to both Jews and Gentiles is what the prophet Isaiah foretold 700 years before. In fact, Isaiah encourages the Old Testament Church to look and see the crowds that will be brought to Christ. How does Isaiah put it? *“Lift up your eyes and look about you: all assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, your daughters are carried on the hip.”* Isaiah sees these crowds of people coming from great distances to discover the light of Christ. You think about what happened on Pentecost, when people from all these different countries, Parthians, Medes and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia and Cappadocia, visitors from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism—these were all included in the nations that were coming to the Light of Christ.

But not only does the prophet see the crowds coming, he also foretells how the church will react to this influx of new converts. Isaiah tells us that the fact that Nations will come to Christ’s Light is not only something foretold by the prophet and fulfilled by the Magi. It’s also something III. Celebrated by Believers.

Isaiah describes the emotions that will permeate the church with these words, *“Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy.”* Isn’t that the truth? What is more encouraging for you and me as Christians than to know that God the Holy Spirit is continuing to work in the hearts of men, women and children around the globe? No matter what the color of their skin or their nationality or their language or their political persuasion, God the Holy Spirit is opening their eyes to see the love that God has for them in Christ.

Even today, you think of people who are coming to know the truth of the gospel in places like India, Nigeria, Brazil, Haiti, Philippines, Indonesia, East Asia, Zambia and Vietnam. And these are just a few of the Christians being gathered through into our WELS missions. There are hundreds of thousands if not millions of others being brought into the Light of Christ through the mission efforts of other Christian denominations. By God's grace they are all part of this invisible holy Christian Church.

And yet, I would be remiss if I didn’t include one more group that is included in Isaiah's vision. It's this one. You and I, the Mount Olive family, are included in Isaiah’s vision of the nations who have seen the light. For the fact is, we were all once living in the darkness of unbelief. And yet, by the power of the gospel, in both Word and Sacrament, God worked saving faith in our hearts. And in so doing, he has connected us with believers from nations around the world. On this Festival of Epiphany we celebrate the fact that the one born king of the Jews, came to save more than just Jews. He came to save sinners. And that means he has come for you and me. And that makes the Festival of Epiphany, the Christmas for the Gentiles, a day worth celebrating—no matter what day of the year it falls on. In Jesus’ name. Amen.