

Rising and Shining

First in a Series of Seven Sermons, “A Season of Light”

January 7 and 8, 2023 / Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12, Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12

Isaiah 60 - Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you....Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and exult...

Matthew 2 - For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him....When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Dear Friends in Christ,

My dad was a morning person. The kind who would get up and at it and drink a cup of strong coffee and when it was time for his teenage son to arise - he would gently call up the stairs, “Larry, rise and shine.” Frequently, my first two thoughts were #1 - I don’t want to rise, and #2 - if I do, I certainly don’t feel like shining.

Fast forward 20 years or so, and I became my father. The kind who would get up and at it and drink three cups of strong coffee and then awaken my precious sons and daughters with a few verses of “Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory. Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory. Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory, Children of the Lord.

No doubt my children were less than thrilled with my cheerful approach to the dawn of a new day. This week, as we enter a new year, we do well to admit that by nature, we are spiritually drowsy and slow to let our Gospel lights shine all over the neighborhood. John records Jesus saying it this way, **“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”**

Our sermon series in this Epiphany season is under the theme, “A Season of Light.” The themes of light and darkness are major themes throughout Scriptures. At least six sub-themes come to mind.

First of all, God is Himself described as light. He dwells in unapproachable light. His presence is light. His face shines light. He is the Creator and Provider of light.

Secondly, Jesus is the promised light. He identifies as the Light of the world. His presence radiates light. He gives light and life to humanity, and the darkness will overcome Him.

Third, Israel was called to be a light to the nations. Isaiah predicts that **“nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”**

Fourth, the New Testament Church is called to be like a city of lights set on a hill attracting both Jews and Gentiles to her sanctuary.

Fifth, individual Christians are called to be children of the light, to walk in the light, to work while it is daytime before the night comes when no man can work. Isaiah says that God’s people **shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult.”**

Sixth, the Word of God is pictured a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our paths. Epiphany is one of the oldest seasons in the church year, second only to the Easter season. The word “Epiphany” emphasizes the manifestation, the revealing of Jesus as Savior of the Gentiles. When the Gentile Magi come to worship Jesus, they show that everyone now has access to God.

Our sermon series theme is “A Season of Light.,” and our sermons will emphasize missions and evangelism. Together we will be reading through and discussing a book by Greg Finke, “Joining Jesus on His Mission.”

Upcoming sermons include, “Seeing and Pointing,” “Following and Fishing,” “Foolishness on the Move,” “Salt and Light,” “Planting and Watering,” and “Eyewitnesses.” Today’s sermon reflects all three appointed lessons and is focused on “Rising and Shining.” Two truths we explore today.

Truth #1 is that Rising and Shining starts with the glory of the Lord rising upon us.

Six year old Brandon decided one Saturday morning to fix his parents pancakes. He found a big bowl and spoon. He pulled a chair to the counter, opened the cupboard, and pulled out the heavy flour canister. As he did so, the flour spilled. He scooped up some of the flour into the bowl with his hands, mixed in most of a cup of milk, and added sugar. As he did so, he left a floury trail on the floor which by now had a few tracks left by his kitten.

Brandon was covered with flour and getting frustrated. He wanted this to be something wonderful, but it was turning into a disaster. He didn’t really know what to do next. Whether to put it into the oven or on the stove, and he didn’t know how the stove worked. Then he saw the cat licking from the bowl of mix. He reached to push her away and knocked the egg carton to the floor. As he tried to clean up the mess, he slipped on the eggs. His pajamas were now white and sticky.

Just then he saw Dad standing at the door. Crocodile tears welled up in Brandon's eyes. He was sure a scolding was coming and maybe even a spanking. But that's not at all what happened. Dad walked through the mess, picked up his crying son, and held him close. Together they cleaned up the mess, prepared the meal, and a good time was had by all.

So also is the Christmas story about our dear father in heaven stepping into a messed up world, rescuing us from the powers of darkness, holding us close, and inviting us to have life, and to have it abundantly. What we have always deserved is a scolding and maybe even a spanking, instead our Father in heaven sent His only and beloved Son into our broken world. He dwelt among us for a time in the flesh. And as you well know, He would not be distracted until He had lived the perfect life we needed Him to live, suffered all that we should have suffered, died the death we should have died, rose up in glory on the third day, ascended into the heavens on the 40th day, flooded the nations with His Spirit on the 50th day, and from that day forward invites us to be His witnesses nearby and far away.

The first key to rising and shining in a way that attracts others to Jesus Christ is for the glory of the Lord to rise upon us and inside of us. That happens in the waters of Baptism, at which time the sign of the cross is placed upon our foreheads and hearts, our names are written in the Book of Life, and our Father in heaven claims us as sons and daughters. The glory of the Lord rises upon us and inside of us as often as we listen attentively to God's strong Word, as often as we cry out for the forgiveness of our sins, as often as we remember and treasure and hold onto the truths many of us were taught from our mother's knees, as often as grace and mercy are received into our hearts, as often as we eat and drink with repentant and believing hearts at our Lord's Supper.

Truth #2 is that Rising and Shining involves a daily refusal to be distracted.

The Wise Men were not necessarily kings, but most likely astrologers. They were no doubt wise in the eyes of the world due to the fact that they were highly educated and terrific students of literature, including Old Testament prophecy. They likely hailed from Babylon, where astrology and astronomy were carefully pursued. But their wisdom in the eyes of the Lord was in their refusal to be distracted.

In at least three ways, the Spirit of God guided the Magi.

First, they were guided by Old Testament prophecy, which included a prediction that "A Star will come out of Jacob... a scepter will rise in Israel. Secondly, they were guided in their dreams, where they were warned not to return to Herod and instead departed to their own country by another way. And third, of course, they were guided by a star

which first of all rose and led them to Jerusalem - and a second time, it rose and went before them until it rested over the very place where the holy family were.

The mission of these first Gentile worshipers was simple. Find the newborn King and adore Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold signified that Jesus was in fact, a King. Frankincense indicated that He was truly divine. And when they laid myrrh at His feet, they were focused on the One destined to die.

In those days, myrrh was a resin used as a perfume in the embalming process. Also it served as an anesthetic when mixed with wine. We fast forward to the cross, where Jesus would need such an anesthetic as he was beaten for our bad habits. Bruised for our temper tantrums. Chastised for our self-centeredness. Wounded for our stubbornness, slapped around as a consequences for our immorality - and the list goes on. Nailed and crucified until he was almost dead and crying out that he was thirsty. At which point a Roman soldier offered him wine mixed with myrrh, which he refused.

It was for the joy set before him that Jesus refused to be distracted until He could die as a broken and pierced and forsaken servant, only to rise up again and shine on a glorious Sunday morning

Dear Friends in Christ, our desire is that this Epiphany season at Faith Lutheran would be all about rising and shining with the Good News of great joy. That the Spirit of God would move us away from a lukewarm brand of Christianity to one that is contagious. That we would think and listen and converse and act in a way that others are attracted to Christ, to His teachings, to His Church, and to His promises.

Two takeaways, in closing today, on the subject of witnessing to how deep and how wide and how long is the love of Jesus Christ.

Takeaway #1 is remember how messed up life can get when we allow ourselves to be distracted away from that which truly matters. This past Tuesday, I rose up with good intentions of starting my day off right - namely with a good strong cup of coffee and a good solid time of devotions and prayer. (Story of pouring a glass of water in my brand new Minnesota Vikings coffee mug and drinking it / pouring another mug of water and pouring it into the dog's dish / filling the dog's food dish / pouring another mug of water and into the coffee Keurig, setting the mug on the cupboard next to the Keurig, putting in the pod of strong dark roast coffee, pressing the brew button, instead of going for my devotional books, I was distracted outside to pick up the newspaper, greeted in a friendly way one of my neighbors with her dog Lucy, came back in to notice that the coffee had begun trickling down onto the cupboard and flood, since I had forgotten to put the coffee mug in its proper position / at which time I needed to clean up the mess, after which I chose to read the editorial page instead of my devotional time / one more

time good intentions gone awry. Takeaway #1 - how messed up life can get when we are distracted away from the kingdom of God by all these other

Takeaway #2 is how beautiful life can be when we stand up strong and firm for Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in our lives.

A story is told about a Christian woman who lived next to an atheist. Every morning, she would go out on her porch and lift her hands in the air and shout out “Praise the Lord.” Day after day the atheist man did a slow burn as he listened to her spew what he considered pure nonsense. One day he responded to her “praise the Lord” with a “There is no Lord! Get used to it.”

Not long after, the Christian woman ran out of money and food. She cried out in prayer, “Help me Lord. I have no more food. My house is cold. I ran out of money.”

The next day, three bags of groceries showed up on her porch, courtesy of her atheist neighbors. She cried out, “Praise the Lord. He has sent food to me and my family.” To which he jumped up and responded, “Aha, he said, there is no Lord. I brought you those groceries.” To which she responded, “I praise you, Jesus. You sent me groceries and made the devil pay for them!”

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who have their bad days, their ok days, and their really good days, in terms of rising and shining. On their bad days, they read their newspapers instead of their Bibles, their coffee drips all over their kitchen floors, and they are ashamed to say they were too busy to pray.

On their ok days, they confess their fault and failures to their Savior, and His grace sweeps over their souls like a sprinkler system giving new life to a parched lawn. The Holy Spirit is their Teacher, their Mentor, their Coach, and their Guide. And on their really good days, the glory of the Lord rises up inside of them in such a way that their church is like a city of lights set on a hill, attracting others to Christ and to His promises. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.