

## Dear Future Me: Brighten Up!

A sermon based on Isaiah 60:1-6 - ***“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.***

***<sup>2</sup> See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.***

***<sup>3</sup> Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.***

***<sup>4</sup> “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.***

***<sup>5</sup> 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.***

***<sup>6</sup> 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.”***

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I tried a little experiment this morning...did any of you catch it? Anyone bold enough to guess what it was? Here it is...I changed my greeting. I changed my greeting. I know it's too easy to become too mundane in the way we greet each other...where we often resort to the “mostly” automatic and mindless, “How are you today?” “I’m doing well/I’m doing ok/I’m doing great. How are you?” And a similar response.

It's a new year, so I changed my greeting. As you walked in and I greeted you...as I shook your hand at the beginning of worship, I tried on a big, goofy smile and tried phrases like, “I’m doing far greater than I’ve ever deserved,” “Any better and I’d be in heaven,” and my favorite, “This is the day the Lord has made; how can I not be glad in it?” And, not usually being a super warm and fuzzy guy, I even tried the handshake while patting the other person on the shoulder a couple of times. Did you notice?

But, it's a little more than that. Now, I’m certainly no candy-striper or Patch Adams...I wouldn't consider myself to be a constant ball of energy (even a super-pastor wears down, too...just kidding!!). But you know, the number of times I’ve greeted people after worship – maybe it was downstairs at fellowship or right as they were walking out of the door, what I’ve heard in response – far more than once – were

phrases like, "I'm not doing too well," or "I'm doing ok," or "Pastor, let me tell you...(which you can guess what kind of story might come next)."

I get it. I know everyone has stuff going on in their lives (and if you can't share it with your pastor – which I do want to hear about it – then where can you?!?). But can you also maybe think about it this way? We just got done with an hour of worship, where I tried (and I think successfully) to convey to you the best news ever...no matter the week...that Jesus loves you so much...so much he lived and died and rose for you to take away your sins and to make things better – permanently and eternally - between you and God. We spend our entire worship praising Jesus for that loving work. And, then, how quickly we resort back to everything that's wrong in our lives.

It's kind of a let-down. So, again, I experimented starting on an even greater positive this morning with my greeting to you because here's what I want. I want you to brighten up!

I guess you could say Isaiah was in a similar situation. Now, I wouldn't expect any of you to remember this, but the book of Isaiah is split rather neatly into two halves. The first half is quite the Debbie-downer. God's doing a spiritual examination of the Israelites' lives, and you know what he finds? Spiritual cancer, garbage, darkness – call it what you will – he sees sin...a whole lot of sin and wickedness.

And he's saddened...and he's angry (in a way that's right for only God to be angry)...and he's fed up. So, you know what he does? Through Isaiah, he promises judgment. He promises punishment. You remember what form that punishment took? Captivity for the Israelites...70 years of captivity in a foreign land – Babylon – and that after experiencing God's wrath in the form of the Babylonians sieging their land, demolishing God's temple, ripping them from their homes and from their lives. It would definitely be a dark time in the lives of the Israelites.

Not unlike what we have known, too. Ok, I know, our nation is not in turmoil (at least, physically...I think most would agree our government is a bit of a mess). Most of our lives aren't undergoing a drastic change, not like what the Israelites would soon experience.

But there is still darkness. Only a few days into 2020, and I've already had a number of conversations with people who are being affected – emotionally – by the darkness up here. You know how that goes. The darkness is real, and it's hard to handle.

But it's not just that. There is still darkness...because sin still has a hold here. I mean, let's face it, darkness surrounds us...even as believers. The darkness of waning morals, the darkness of increased wickedness, the darkness of people lost in the darkness of depression and despair, mourning in the darkness of death...it's all here. And it's not just the people, especially the unbelievers around us who are stuck in the dark. It impacts every one of us, doesn't it?

All of us were born in such darkness the Bible describes us as being born blind. Now that's dark. Darkened to any thoughts of serving God, we lived to serve ourselves. Just as the color black absorbs all the colors of the rainbow reflecting nothing back, we were entirely self-absorbed, giving only to those who might do something for us in return or at least make us feel good about ourselves, which, let's face it, is still selfish. As such selfish sinners, who gave no thought to pleasing God, we were doomed to spend an eternity in the darkness of hell. And we were in such darkness we couldn't find a way out. In fact we were so blind, we were ignorant to our own problem.

And that's how we were...

But now...***"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 upon you and his glory appears over you."***

That's how Isaiah started our verses. You see, again, the first half of Isaiah conveys a rather dark message of sin and wickedness and judgment. But now, we have the second half...a complete, 180 shift in focus...from darkness to light...to the Light.

More than just a lighthouse, a beacon of hope in the dark night, Jesus came as the Light. He came as more of a search light. You see, when you were lost in the darkness of sin, doomed to the darkness of a grave, condemned to eternal darkness in hell, he sought you out. Like the search and rescue team, he spotted you in the dark, shone his light on you and rescued you.

Christ is that brilliant light Isaiah describes as ***"the glory of the Lord."*** He shined in this dark world as a sinless person—1 John even says ***"in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5)***. I saw this picture on Facebook a few weeks ago and had to do some research online to make sure it was true – which it was. It was a picture of a lit match, held up next to a wall, with a light shining on it. Guess what you could see on the wall? A shadow from the matchstick...nothing from the flame. There is absolutely no darkness in light.

And that was Jesus. He was like a brilliant student. He never got an answer wrong on God's test of morals! He shined to the Gentiles (that is, the non-Jews) as the Savior of all people, not just a few in one chosen race. He shined to the ends of the earth. That's what we're celebrating today, Epiphany: Jesus is not just Savior of the Jews; he's ***our*** Savior, just as we was to the Greeks in Paul's day or to the foreign Magi ***"from afar"*** of his infant days.

He's the Light in your life...who forgave you by his sinless death in your place. He's the Light who made you perfect by his perfect life—his perfect score credited to you. He's the Light of the World who saved you and, by his Holy Spirit, has enlightened you to these wonderful truths...he's flicked on the switch in your heart. He's brightened you up, hasn't he?

Which means now, we're not in the dark anymore. The darkness of this world doesn't impact us the way it does so many others. We're safe in the Light...safe eternally. And we have peace...the peace that drives away the darkness of sin, of despair, of living to serve ourselves.

Again, basking in the glory of the Son...of God, the Light of the World, we're brightened up....because, not only does Jesus' glory shine in our lives, but we shine with it as well.

You see, this morning, God calls out to all of us, "Rise and shine!" Well, okay, technically it's, ***"Arise, shine!"*** but it means the same thing. Right, after having been brightened up by light of Christ, God says, in turn, ***"Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn...Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you... Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy..."*** In other words, he calls us to "Brighten up! Rise and shine!" and reflect the light we've absorbed in Jesus.

You see, just as the moon has no light of its own, but reflects the sun, so too we simply reflect the glory of Jesus. Just as a glow-in-the-dark star captures the light of the lamp or the black light and reflects it, we reflect the love of Jesus. We brighten up and shine with the radiance he gives. Which means, we

don't have to snap back with an ever better insult after we receive one. We see Jesus' patience even in the face of insults. And we reflect it. We don't have to spend our dollars just on ourselves, but see Jesus' generosity to us. And we reflect it. We don't have to strive for power, control, or fame. We see Jesus' humble service to others caring about the opinion of one person—God the Father. And we reflect it.

In fact, we love to do that. As Christians, we all love to hear God say, "Brighten up! Rise and shine!" We love to serve our God in thanks. We can't help it. The moon can't help but reflect the sun. It doesn't have a choice. The glow-in-the-dark stars can't help but give off the light they've received. They don't have a choice. And, again, we can't help it. We reflect the glory of Jesus and mirror him in how we live, in how we love, and in how we behave toward others.

We will reflect the glory of Jesus. How's that for motivational poster material? Because, the truth is, we're not always going to feel like being a light for Christ. We haven't always. The darkness is still very powerful. So, what can we do?

Well, with this being the year 2020, maybe a phrase that comes to mind is "Hindsight is 20/20." It's easy to look back, to look back at what happened, why it happened, and to think, "If I could just go back and tell the past me whatever." We can't do that, though. The past is already set in stone.

But the future isn't. You can impact your future. And so, during this season of Epiphany 2020, instead of looking back, we're going to look forward. And looking forward, we're going to work on a time capsule of sorts...for one year from now.

And what I'm going to ask you to do, each Sunday in Epiphany, is fill out a letter that you would write to future you. It's the extra sheet in your worship folders, with the heading "Dear future me." Knowing what God tells you right now, what advice and encouragement would you tell yourself in the future, when the darkness is still around and threatening to creep back into your life? When you don't know what life will look like in a year...who's in charge, what does the world scene look like, what does your own life look like? Again, how would you brighten up future you? What would you say?

Yes, I know this is kind of quirky. I've been known to do that. But here's why I'm asking all of you to do this. Because, as Christians, we're pretty good at talking. We can say all the right things about knowing what God wants us to do. The follow-through, however – putting our words and knowledge into action – there's a lot of room for improvement there. This is one way to start improving.

So, for the next couple of months, I'll provide the letter for you to fill out, as well as an envelope. At the end of Epiphany, you'll be able to seal the envelope, give it to me, and I'll send it to you in a year, so next year, you can read God's encouragement to you...from you.

So, to start us out this morning, it's this. Next year, when the darkness is back, and you're either feeling down in the dumps or not feeling like reflecting Jesus' love, what would you say to brighten yourself up?

What will brighten you up in the future...finding random \$20 as you're sorting your laundry to wash? Having a great phone conversation with a good friend you haven't talked to in ages? Getting a clean bill of health at the doctor?

More importantly, what will brighten you up to reflect the Light? There's one solution...and it's not positive greetings from Pastor. Instead, it's this...spend more time in the Light of God's Word. The more light a glow-in-the-dark star gets, the brighter it shines in the dark. But it doesn't glow very bright if it

hasn't been in the light in a while. So bask in the light of the Son again...and again. Absorb his mercy, his grace, his peace. Absorb it through his Word. And then you will reflect it. You will, as Jesus says, "**Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven**" (Matthew 5:16).

Then, and only then and when you've basked in the Son, can you and will you forgive just as you've been forgiven...and give generously just as God has given so generously to you. Only then will you love just as you've been loved and serve others just as you have been served.

Yes, it's still a dark world. Not just because we have so little light. But because of so much sin, hatred, violence, and ignorance. And that darkness isn't going away until the end of the world. But we have the Light who makes us no longer afraid of the dark. We have Jesus. He's brightened us up. Our sins are forgiven and we're at peace. And now, we have opportunity to share that Light with others. So, brighten up, and reflect the light of the Son. And we will because Christians glow in the dark. Amen.

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