

If we listen carefully to today's readings, we notice something important right away: darkness is always part of the world.

In the reading from Isaiah, it is out of the darkness that God is calling his people:

*"Arise, shine; for your light has come."*

These words are spoken to a people who have returned from exile to a ruined city — words of hope set between two laments, the first condemning the people's collective sin, the second describing the judgement of God. And so this light appears, in the middle of deep darkness.

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes from prison. And though he speaks as one who suffers, Paul's message is one of revelation, emphasizing the mysterious workings of God's grace. The unity of Jew & Gentile was far from obvious to him, as one formed as a Pharisee. And this has similarities in our day. *Without God's action, the church divides along the same lines as the world.*

In our reading from Matthew's Gospel, the birth of Jesus is anything but peaceful. A paranoid king feels threatened, & we are told that the city is "troubled." These are significant details. God's action in the world comes about not through calm consensus, but through danger & secrecy, & by the mysteries of divine intervention. Christ the King is born in a manger — facing the threat of death in his very infancy. Men filled with the desire to rule will go to mad lengths to maintain control.

All of this to say that, before we rush to joy, the Bible insists that we first acknowledge the truth: the glory of God's light is seen best against the gloom of the fearful & broken world it breaks into.

And this is where the Bible meets us. We also live in a world where light feels fragile, & so many people are spiritually displaced — like the exiles in Jerusalem — trying to rebuild lives, faith, & community amid disappointment & exhaustion.

In this world of racial divisions, political hostilities, & global conflicts, the unity Paul proclaims can feel impossibly idealistic. And this is true in the church as much as it is true in the world. We all struggle to embody reconciliation, to overcome the temptation to merely reflect all the brokenness around us. And like Herod, our world often reacts to God's reign with anxiety. When Christ challenges our power structures, our certainties, our self-importance, the response is not always joy. Sometimes it is fear. Resistance. Hostility.

Even personally, many of us know this trouble. We long for light, but we also know the darkness of grief, doubt, sin, weariness. We may hear "*Arise, shine*" & quietly think, *I'm not sure I have the strength*. And yet, this is precisely where today's readings refuse to let us stop. Into the darkness, God speaks a word that

does not depend on human readiness: “Arise, shine; for your light has come.”

Notice Isaiah does not say, “*Arise, shine, once you get your act together.*” He does not say, “*Arise, shine, after the city is rebuilt.*” He says the light has already come—because the glory of the Lord has risen.

In Ephesians, Paul insists that the unity of humanity is not a human achievement but a divine gift. Jew & Gentile are *made one in Christ*, not by shared culture, talent, or moral superiority. Christ brings us together. This is the grace that the church does not dispense but simply proclaims: grace has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew, Jesus is first recognized as King not by insiders but by outsiders — strangers from the East. This represents nations coming to the light. Herod schemes, the powers of darkness are stirred up — but God acts, & the child lives. God’s saving purpose is revealed as global, generous, unstoppable.

And so, we see it is not that grace is fragile but rather grace is persistent. It never stops flowing to us.

So what does this mean for us, here, today? First, it means we do not have to make the light. We are not called to *be* the light — we are called to *reflect* the light that has already come in Christ.

Second, it means that the church matters. Not as a club for the righteous, but as a living sign that reconciliation is possible. When the church embodies unity across difference, it proclaims the gospel more loudly than words ever could. This happens every time two or three share talk & snacks at coffee hour, carpool to church, or meet in Bible study, each coming from different life experiences & understandings of God with us.

Third, it means that joy is not naïve. Like the wise men, we rejoice not because the world is safe, but because God is faithful. *“They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”* — not at the end of the story, but at its risky beginning: because they saw the outcome of God’s gift to us.

And so, finally, the call of Epiphany is not to comfort us to sleep, but to have courage for the journey. Courage to arise, to shine, to live as people who believe that darkness does not get the last word.

Brothers & sisters in Christ, the light has come. The nations are still being gathered. The mystery is still being revealed. In other words: God is not finished with us yet. And so, let’s arise. Shine. And trust that the glory of the Lord has risen upon us now & forever. Amen.