

## THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Isaiah 60:1-6

*Arise, shine!*

Last Friday was the Epiphany, and since we do not have an Epiphany service, I'd like us to meditate on the first lesson appointed for that day today. Hear the words of the prophet Isaiah: *[text printed separately]*

The church of the old covenant at Isaiah's time was in shambles, or so it seemed. They were on the brink of complete disaster. When the Temple was full, it seems that, for the most part, it was full of hypocrites who professed the faith with their mouths but had no faith in their hearts, who gave offerings to the Lord but not their first fruits, who knew Israel's beautiful liturgy but simply went through the motions of it. Many had fallen from the faith and many more were yet falling. The young people were chasing after the changing winds of popular culture and spirituality. People were, it seemed, ever more openly flaunting their sin and accepting lifestyles contrary to God's will and good sense. The church faced what oftentimes does it the most harm: prosperous times, which breed complacency.

The average Joe thought everything was going well and saw little to worry about, but the faithful knew better; Isaiah, and others, had been prophesying and preaching the coming wrath of God. Unfortunately, we human beings have an unhealthy habit of not concerning ourselves with such things as God's wrath until it is upon us, or just before it is upon us. Part of the problem was that so many figured that because they were in the Temple directory they were exempted from God's wrath. They forgot that God promises even harsher judgment for those who've been taught the wonders of His grace and nonetheless take them for granted. But the faithful knew better. The northern kingdom had already been destroyed and Judah was no less sinful than their brothers in the north. How long could it be until their apathy and disobedience received its due reward as well? And so the church of the old covenant sat near despair, disheartened, discouraged, and disillusioned. And what did God say to them through Isaiah? "*Arise, shine!*" In other words, "*Be of good cheer!*" And people wonder if God has a sense of humor.

"What? Look at us! Be of good cheer? Are you mocking us? Arise and shine? Why? Because the church is dying out? Because even many of those who come to the Temple live as those who don't? Because our children are straying? Because our message is mocked? Be of good cheer? Why?"

"*Because your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.*" That was the Lord's answer through His messenger Isaiah. And now we have to understand something: when Isaiah prophesied, he often saw the present and future wrapped into one great event. He saw Old Testament Israel, the New Testament Church, and the saints in heaven caught up in a grand tornado of fulfillment. Isaiah is speaking here of Christ's coming and of the glorious assembly of all believers on the Last Day. Their light was Christ, who came to the New Testament Church in Bethlehem and to whom nations already began to come at Bethlehem in the Holy Gospel for Epiphany. Their glory also is Christ, and the gospel of Christ, which radiates the light of God's love.

How could God's light be their light too? How could God's glory be their glory too? Our first lesson, also from Isaiah (chapter 49), explains it:

And he said to me, "You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."  
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;  
I will make you as a light for the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Christ is called Israel, and then Christ is told He will save Israel. Thus, He stands in the muddy waters of the Jordan today as us for us, our substitute, but also God's Son. Thus, God's light was also Old Testament Israel's light and is our light, as New Testament Israel, as well. Christ shines for us, on us, that He might also shine

through us. Who knew so much marvelous theology was packed into that simple children's song, *This Little Light of Mine*? Remember that next time you stick your finger in the air.

Today is the Church Year's Mission Sunday. Notice how God comforts his sorrowful and struggling people. He paints an inspiring picture of countless people from every nation flocking to the New Jerusalem, the home of the Church forever. The tiresome labor of the church, so often opposed by the very hopeless people to whom it proclaimed hope, has not been fruitless, but has born abundant fruit through the gospel, fruit that surpasses all our expectations, our understanding, our offerings, and our prayers.

The fact is that church will not and cannot die, because the gospel must always have its ears. Kill it here and it is born there. Bleed it and it grows healthier. Mock it and it becomes more serious. Hate it and it loves all the more. Yes, God's Church is always growing, even when our churches may seem to shrink, growing so much that our hearts must throb and swell and become eternally wider to make room for the joy that it brings. Perhaps Africa will send missionaries to America someday, but it will not be because the Church has died; it will be because the Church thrives and continues to discharge its God-given duty to spread the Word, even where it has been spread and strangled before.

We too still live in world not only covered in darkness, but in thick darkness. We are still surrounded by people who grope about for something meaningful but can take hold of only meaningless things. Watch a few commercials to see how hungry people are for fulfillment, and how desperately they will pursue it, unfortunately, in all the wrong places. Looking about through the beer goggles of the sinful nature, so that even the most pathetic of suitors seems beautiful, their eyes seize on empty promises and hollow shells and they convince themselves, "If only I lose this weight, or have that car, or drink that bottle, or take that pill, or sit in that chair, or meet that person, or achieve that lifestyle, and so forth, then, then I will be fulfilled. Then I will be enlightened." But, stretch marks, insurance bills, bankruptcies, divorce papers, and throes of depression later, it is discovered that things sold in darkness to people walking in darkness aren't always as enlightening as they seem.

The Magi followed a star to the fulfillment of God's promises and their greatest need; the shepherds heard angels sing. But God is good, and He did not want to spoil the stars and the angels at our expense. He wants us to know the joy of bringing the darkened into the light, of shining in a world in covered with the fog of confusion. God has granted us mortal, sinful men the honor of being His lights, of reflecting and shining the light of His Son to those around us. But we will only be moved to shine that light and share that good news as much as we appreciate it ourselves. Until then, this little light of ours will remain in our nose or our navel, searching the dark places of the world for precisely what God has told us we will find: junk.

Not all of us can go to the corners of the earth sharing the good news. Not many of us have the gifts to do that. But we have gifts to give to support such work. And we have the gifts and the opportunities to shine right in our own backyard, to our own family and friends who wander in darkness, who grope about for fulfillment, who, whether or not they will admit it, deep down know that God is either the most cruel Creator of all or that He wants something more for them. And you have knees to pray, to pray for those who serve as missionaries around the world, often in the face of great danger, and to pray for those to whom you have become a missionary in your own sphere of influence.

Yeah, we face challenges, as the church on earth always has and will. Yeah, we are still imperfect lights, who often have to be relit by the Light, who often have to beg Him to remove the darkness that has crept into our own hearts. Yeah, we have a sinful flesh that wants nothing more than to flaunt all these challenges and obstacles before our eyes and urge us to despair. But Isaiah says, "*Arise, shine! God's Light is your Light. He is your fulfillment of God's promises and the fulfillment of your greatest need. He is your Savior.*" And He wants those around you to know that too. Don't wait for an angel or star for that to happen. "*Arise, shine!*" After all, what greater joy could you ever know than to hear someone on the Last Day praise the Father for what you made known to them, whether personally or through your offerings? What greater joy could there be than to

embrace your once-wayward brother or sister, son or daughter, mother or father, neighbor or friend, and joyfully announce to the Savior, "He's with me!" "She's with me!"? Amen.