

The Epiphany of Our Lord

GLORY IN THE DARK

Isaiah 60:1-6

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Analysis by Eric W. Evers

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. 5Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

DIAGNOSIS: Darkened

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Unchanged*

Israel had a problem. They had returned from exile, just as the Lord had promised, but nothing was as expected. That is the best guess for the historical situation in Isaiah 60. Jerusalem and her temple were in ruins. Poverty and struggle were the rule of the day. Neighboring nations chuckled and rolled their eyes. And this was the long-awaited, yearned-for salvation? This was the

glorious undoing of God's people's shame? Perhaps we find an echo of this dilemma in some early-January doldrums. Christmas is long gone. But the bills to pay for it all abide still. The family tensions, washed out for a while by the lights on the tree, are back. The frustrations and stresses of daily life are no longer covered over by wrapping paper and tinsel. This is what the big deal was about? This is the salvation the preacher was talking about at that Christmas Eve service my mother / spouse / Sunday School pageant-participating kid made me go to? Nothing's different. Nothing's changed.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Unglorified*

Israel's problems, of course, went a lot deeper than destroyed infrastructure and a daunting nation-building task. The canonical context for this text is immediately after Isaiah 59 – a lament for Israel's sinfulness (see especially 59:2, and then 9). Injustice, unrighteousness, and oppression have all come back to Jerusalem, carried in the hearts of the returning exiles. Darkness covers the people, but it isn't the shadow of war-torn landscapes. It is the deep spiritual gloom of people whose location has been changed, but whose disposition remains far from the heart's true spiritual home in the Lord. Again, the parallel to our own day is compelling. Having come down from the good-feelings high of "the holidays," we remain essentially the same as we were back in mid-December. It's not just the external daily stress and the lack of sunlight that grinds us down. It's the inner dimness, the spiritual weight we carry. All those problems "out there" have a source, after all, and that source is "in here," inside our hearts. The preacher told us that the Savior had come. Fat lot of good he's done for us, though.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Unsaved*

And that's the fear. Maybe the return from exile wasn't a divine highway, but a passing confluence of world events. Maybe it was

God's work, but simply sending us home to die, national hospice of a sort. The nation isn't saved. And that means God's hand is against it. The Lord either saves or condemns; he isn't a neutral party. Such a terrifying conclusion is in store for us, as well, thousands of years removed from Isaiah. Darkness covers our lands, it fills our hearts, and indeed it seems to be multiplying. As the consequences of our own faults rebound upon us, and we are not spared, we see the wrathful will of the holy and terrible Lord at work. Deep is the darkness indeed for those unchanged by the coming of the Savior.

PROGNOSIS: Glorified in Darkness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Glory Arises on a Cross*

"The glory of the Lord has risen upon you... the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you." Thus speaks Isaiah to a darkened, defeated people. For ancient Israel, it was a promise, a promise meant to create hope. But for us, the ones who walk now after the birth of the Christ child, these words are an Epiphany. The glory of the Lord has risen upon us! We may not have had eyes to see it until now, but the Spirit's job is to open up the blind. The Lord's glory has indeed been raised over us, lifted up on a cross. The Lord's glory is the crucified Son, a cross rising up out of a cradle. (Lest this seem a far-fetched leap from Christmas to Good Friday, note the funeral myrrh added by the magi to Isaiah's vision.) Wise men bringing gifts (see the appointed Gospel lection) do signify the revealing of the Lord to the nations; but they are only a foretaste. The light, the brightness that shines forth with the Lord's glory, streams from the cross, where the Son of God died for sinners. For a nation brought back from exile only to repeat the same sins that first brought the calamity upon it; for nations utterly unmoved by the birth of the Savior; for us, the Prince of Peace bled and died, while we were sunk deep in the

darkness of wrath and sin. Just so, for sinners, the glory of salvation is revealed and given!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Mercy Shines*

With hope bestowed upon them, Israel was called to manifest the Lord's goodness. With the glory of mercy and forgiveness poured out upon us, we who hear the good news are ourselves empowered to shine forth. "Then you shall see and be radiant" (60:5); grace reflects. We who have received mercy shine, not with moral perfection or social superiority, but with the cruciform, hidden glory of being forgiven. We radiate, not our own majesty, but the majesty of our revealed King. We are, in reality, transformed: not from sinner to saint, but from sinner alone to sinner-and-saint, from lost transgressor to found fumbler-and-yet-still-by-grace-follower. Oh, this salvation has done much for us indeed! We have been made into showpieces of Christ's mercy, examples to the world that God is in the business of saving sinners. What an Epiphany!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *An Attractive Salvation*

So, do you think the cynic from steps 1 and 2 might be interested in this opening of the eyes? Isaiah knew that when the glory of the Lord was revealed, the nations would be drawn to Israel. Grace doesn't merely reflect, it attracts. The sin-darkened eyes of the soul long for light. And when the radiance of forgiveness and healing glimmers on the edge of vision, people draw near. The Magi followed a star's light. Isaiah foresaw the nations streaming to Israel, bringing lost sons and daughters. We have family, family we don't even know! Fellow sinners who belong in the light with us will be drawn when mercy reflects off our faces. Let us, then, orient ourselves so that grace does shine forth to the world, reflected by us. May the grace that we have received radiate beyond our comfortable pews, into our daily lives, and then into the lives of those around

us. That's evangelism. That's salvation. That's an epiphany! For the world remains dark, and we ourselves still lie in the shadows. But salvation has dawned in Christ. That is the Lord's glory. May it burst forth upon us, and upon the world.