

Epiphany “Darkness to Light” Jan 6, 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Many people complain about how dark it is this time of the year. But imagine living in the little town of Barrow, Alaska. It's located on the farthest northern tip of the state of Alaska, above the Arctic Circle. If you think it's dark in here this time of the year, you haven't seen anything. In Barrow Alaska, the sun sets in the afternoon on November 18, and it doesn't rise again until January 24. 65 days of darkness. 65 days when the sun doesn't shine. Up there, due to the tilt of the earth, the sun never shows itself for over two months out of the year. But when the sun does rise for a moment on January 24, the whole town comes out to celebrate, because finally, there is light again.

Is the prophet Isaiah speaking to the people of Barrow, Alaska, when he writes in verse one of our Old Testament lesson for this morning: “Arise, shine, for your light has come!”? Although Barrow, Alaska might be a good illustration, what God's Word talks about here is a different kind of light, and a different kind of darkness. And when this special light that God speaks about begins to shine through that ugly darkness, the results are much more spectacular and joyful than anything you could experience in northern Alaska. And this light applies to the whole world.

Today is the last day of the Christmas season. In the Christian church year, the celebration of the birth of Christ goes on from the 25th of December to Epiphany, January 6th, 12 days. Tomorrow is the official beginning of the Epiphany season of the church year. What does the word "epiphany" mean? An “epiphany” is when something reveals itself, or shows itself. For example, in Barrow, Alaska, after 65 days of darkness, the sun finally reveals itself for everyone to see. That's an epiphany.

In the church year, the Epiphany season is when The Son of God reveals his glory for everyone to see. For the next six weeks, we will be in the Epiphany season, and the Scripture readings, the hymns, the sermons – almost everything that you see and hear and sing and pray in our worship service will serve one purpose, and that is this – to reveal to you, to show you, the glory of your Savior Jesus Christ.

You can sum up the festival of Epiphany with one phrase, and that one phrase is the theme for our sermon this morning: FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT. “Arise,” God says to you, “Shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.” The Bible pictures you and me and the rest of the world as a group of people living in darkness, people who have been waiting and waiting and waiting for the sun to rise: “See,” God says, “darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.”

God pictures our world as a very dark place. Spiritually dark. You can see evidence of spiritual darkness by looking around you – early last week a Muslim extremist killed some Christian doctors working at a mission in Yemen. The Muslim said that he did this because he was trying to “cleanse his religion.” There you see evidence of spiritual darkness. We’ve also recently heard about the possibility of human cloning. A spokesman for this project said that this was a very important thing, because this is how a human can attain eternal life. If you are able to reproduce a clone of yourself, then you are, in a sense, able to live forever, the spokesman said. Once again, this is evidence of spiritual darkness. Look around you, watch people, listen to them talk, see what they do, and it will become very very clear to you that our world is a very dark place spiritually. Church involvement is falling in the US. God’s plan for families and for human identity is being opposed. Christians and Christianity are being blamed for racism, sexism, discrimination and poverty

But the most frightening place to look, my friends, is within yourself. Daytime TV celebrities will tell you that there is an incredible amount of good, and an incredible amount of strength inside yourself: “If you would only reach deep within yourself, you would see how good you really are!”

But this has not proven to be the case. Over and over again, people look within themselves for strength to bear up under trying circumstances, and that strength is not there. People look within themselves for something good, but the more closely you look within yourself, the more clear it becomes that there is nothing there but selfishness and materialism and selfishness and materialism. God sees your soul as a very dark place, a place full of sin.

Yes, “thick darkness is over the peoples, but...” God says, “...but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.” The birth of the Lord, Jesus Christ, is described in the Bible as the rising of the sun on a very dark place. The sun rises, and the darkness disappears. What happens to the darkness of your sin and guilt when Jesus rises in your life? It disappears! Jesus shines his forgiveness and grace into your life, and the darkness in your soul disappears.

If you feel guilt in your life, guilt from committing sin after sin, guilt from trying to make things right with God, guilt from trying to be “good” even though you know you can never do enough, then you, my friend, are someone who is trapped in darkness. But then you learn that Jesus Christ was born into the world. You learn that he came for the sole purpose of doing what you could not do – making everything right between you and God. You learn that your sins are freely forgiven because Jesus has died for all of your sins on the cross. You can feel your guilt melt away. It is as though the sun has risen in Barrow Alaska for you. Finally you can see that, because of Christ, everything is good between you and God. You have gone from darkness to light.

This is Epiphany – when someone trapped in the darkness of sin sees and believes in the glory of Jesus Christ. When someone finally stops trusting in himself for salvation, and starts trusting in Christ. This is what happened to the wise men from the East. Every year, these Gentiles from a far-away land are the focal point of the Epiphany season. They came from a place where no one knew about the Christ. No one knew about the true God who was sending a Savior. But somehow, they knew. And when they saw his star, somehow they knew that the Messiah had come.

And so, these men left their land of spiritual darkness because they wanted to see and worship the Christ. They made the long trip to Jerusalem, and they were probably surprised to see that this city was just as spiritually dark as the land they had come from.

But finally, they found the Messiah. Isaiah talks about the wise men in verse 3: "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Later in verse 6 it says, "... all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord." There, in the form of a little child, the wise men saw the light of the world. There they saw the glory of God, and this is what filled them with a spirit of awe and worship. They had gone from darkness to light, and they rejoiced, and gave this child who was their God their gifts from afar.

Many people call Epiphany the "Gentile Christmas," because one of the main themes of the Epiphany season is that Christ is a light, not just for a select group of people like the Jews, but for all people, all over the world. Epiphany is when anyone living in the darkness of sin, people like you and me and those wise men from the east – anyone can come and see the glory of God, as he reveals it through the person of Jesus Christ. Just as the sun rises on every nation, on every kind of people, no matter who you are or what your background is, just as the sun, every morning, rises on you, so it is with Christ. His grace, his forgiveness, his salvation, rises and shines on the Jews in Bethlehem, but also on the wise men from the East. His grace and forgiveness rises and shines on every person on this earth – every person is invited to believe in this child, to worship him, to find their salvation in him. No matter who you are, you too, can go from darkness to light.

And no matter how dark the world becomes, the light of Jesus Christ will never stop shining for you. My friends, don't feel too sorry for the people of Barrow, Alaska. While it is true that right now, the sun never rises there, that's not how it is during the summer. Six months from now, the earth will tilt a different way, and then, in Barrow, Alaska, the sun will never set.

From May 10 until August 2, for almost three months, the sun will not stop shining in Barrow. People call that place “the land of the midnight sun.”

And so it is with your soul. Once the grace and mercy and forgiveness of Jesus Christ rises in your life, it will never stop shining. In His forgiveness every day dawns anew. No matter how dark the world gets around you, Christ’s love will always shine in your life. Spiritually, right now, you live in the “land of the midnight sun.” May this Epiphany season be for you a time when you see, ever more clearly, the glory of your Savior, Jesus Christ. “Arise, shine, for your light has come. And the glory of the Lord rises upon you.”

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!