

The Word Made Flesh

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Hi, I'm Lori, and I'm part of the Oakland community.

Today's reading is first from Isaiah 60, verses 1-16, and second from John 1, verses 14-18.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah. Arise, shine, for 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 on you, and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you.

[1 : 07] All assemble and come to you. Your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip. 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 the riches of the nations will come. I'm sorry, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land.

Young camels of Midian and Epa. And from Sheba will come, and all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense, and proclaiming the praise of the Lord. All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you.

The rams of Nebioth will serve you. And they will be accepted as offerings on my altar. And I will adorn my glorious temple. Who are these that fly along like clouds, like doves to their nests?

Surely the islands look to me. In the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your children from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel.

[2 : 12] For he has endowed you with splendor. Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you. Though in anger I struck you, in favor I will show you compassion.

Your gates will always stand open. They will never be shut, day or night, so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations. Their kings led in triumphal procession. For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish.

It will be utterly ruined. The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the juniper, the fir, and the cypress together, to adorn my sanctuary. And I will glorify the place for my feet.

The children of your oppressors will come bowing before you. All who despise you will bow down at your feet, and will call you the city of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

Although you have been forsaken and hated, with no one traveling through, I will make you the everlasting pride and joy of all generations.

[3 : 17] You will drink the milk of nations, and be nursed at royal breasts. Then you will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever. A reading from the Gospel according to John.

John. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, This is the one I spoke about when I said, He who comes after me has surpassed me, because he was before me. Out of his fullness, we have all received grace, in place of grace already given.

For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

[4 : 24] This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Good morning, Christ Church.

We are about five days out from Christmas Eve, and some of us are thinking, hurry up, some of us are thinking, slow down. Our presents are beginning to pile up under the tree just a bit, and I've mentioned to you that the tree we got this year was huge, because I wanted to get my money's worth this year, so lots of girth.

And, you know, I kind of feel dumb with our tree, especially with the job of putting the lights on. That's typically Catherine's job, because it's a geometry problem that's way beyond my competency.

I'm not really qualified for this eight-foot cone, and, like, 40 feet of string, and the question is, you know, how many times do you bank it around that cone?

And for me, I'm going, like, two-thirds of the way up and running out of lights. So, and once I'm not going back down, I'm not going to unwind. I'm just going to take what's left, string it straight to the top, and there's, like, one light at the top of the tree.

[5 : 48] So that's why that's Catherine's job. Although my way would be a nice way to share the Gospel, you know, here's all the light at the bottom of the tree. That's paradise. Here's all the darkness in the middle of the tree.

That's paradise lost. And here's the one light at the top. That's Jesus Christ. He's the hope and the light of the world. Catherine has our tree. I want to start today by saying that light is the opposite of darkness.

I know I just blew your minds, so I'm going to say it one more time. Light is the opposite of darkness. And the people of God receiving this text of Isaiah 60 are a people who are living in darkness, people living in distress and gloom, sorrow and anguish and oppression.

Because of the Babylonian invasion, the Babylonian exile, as we said before, they've had loved ones die. They've had their families ripped apart. They've had their homes torn down, their city burned to ashes, their temple has been reduced to rubble.

And they've been living as refugees in a foreign land for quite a long time. And perhaps you feel that you're living in darkness today. You look at your life and you wonder if God is present with you in any way.

[7 : 07] Maybe you feel like these people, like a smoldering wick that's about to burn out. All the color in your life has gone away. And all you can see is brokenness and bondage and suffering.

And the image here with two words of Isaiah 60 is sort of like a teenager that's asleep on a Saturday morning and they're in a dark room.

It's just, they're dead to the world. And mom comes into that dark room and she throws back the curtains and light comes flooding in. And what does she say? She says, rise and shine.

A new day has dawned. And of course, the teenager so appreciates the wisdom of his mother that he just bounces out of bed. But the message today from Isaiah 60 is that God's light will draw all nations to know him as savior.

That's the promise of Isaiah 60, that God's light will draw all nations to know him as savior. And I want us to think for a minute about God's, these two words that God speaks to his people, rise and shine.

[8 : 17] Verse one, arise and shine for 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.

God is likening himself to the sun, the sun that rises at dawn, the sun that breaks the darkness with light, the sun that scatters the night away. And how is it that God is the light of the world?

Well, we know that the sun gives life and that if the sun were to go out, if it were just to never come back out again, we would all freeze to death, right?

If the sun went down tonight and didn't come up tomorrow, all of our plants would begin to die and it would kill the food chain and we would be dead pretty soon. And so imagine a world with no sun.

It's all darkness and death. And now imagine a world with no God, no one to give us life, no one to give us being and existence. The light of the sun is an image of life.

[9 : 23] But the light of the sun is also an image of the truth. We were locking up here on Sunday night after Lessons and Carols and Walter, our third child, began turning out the lights as I was moving around the sanctuary.

So I started bumping into pews, right? Because without the light, I didn't know the truth about where I was and what was in front of me and where I was going.

And it's similar with us. Without the light of God's truth, we get hurt. We feel pain. This is why the psalmist says in Psalm 36, in your light, we see light.

The sun is not an object that you look at. It's the way that you see everything else. If you look directly at the sun, you're going to burn your eyes out. But if you look, but you look at everything else by the light of the sun.

And God says, I'm going to shine my light on you. And when I shine my light on you, I'm not only going to give you life, I'm going to pour out all of my knowledge and my wisdom and my truth on you. Light is life-giving.

[10 : 31] Light is truth-revealing. And light also is joy-producing. Why do we post all of our sunset and sunrise pictures on social media?

Right? Why do we go in search of these things? Why do I go out on these dark days of December and look for that one sunny spot on those steps over there and on the steps out front of the church to read my book for 15 minutes?

Because it makes me feel good. Because we're searching for beauty. We're searching for joy. We're searching for something to gladden our heart. And God is reassuring his people that sit in the deep darkness of the Babylonian exile and their return and all their collective despondency and their individual depression.

He says to them, I'm going to shine on you like the rising sun. And my light is going to give you life and truth and joy. Notice the double imperative that God says to his people.

He says, in light of that, rise and shine. Rise and shine. Get up, my people, and glow in the dark. Why? Because, verse one, the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

[11 : 42] The light of my eternal glory is going to shine on you. And because of that, verse three, nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Because my light and my glory is flooding you, the people, you are going to shine with brightness and radiance and brilliance and glory and beauty.

And when you do, you're going to have this magnetic drawing power that's going to cause the world to run to you to get the life, to get the truth, to get the joy that the light of my glory brings.

One of the most audacious claims that Jesus makes in the Gospels is he says, I am the light of the world. But I think what's even more audacious than that is in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turns to his disciples and he says, you are the light of the world.

And the Apostle Paul says this in Ephesians 5, he says, for you were once darkness but now you are light in the Lord, live as children of the light. And I just want to encourage us as we think about the light of God shining like the sun that we would start our days over these stressful days of the holidays as the sun is coming up that we would begin our days with 10 minutes or 15 or 20 minutes just letting the objective reality of God's light come flooding in and become the subjective experience of our lives.

[13 : 17] That we would allow God's light to dawn upon our souls. That we would allow the light of God's word and God's spirit to flood us on the inside and illumine us from the inside out that his life coming in would give us his life and his truth and his joy and when it does that it will make us a radiant and an attractive people that Isaiah says will glow in the dark.

We will arise and shine. You with me so far? God's light. What a beautiful image. God's light it says will draw all the nations.

God's light will draw all the nations. How many nations or cultures do you think are represented here at Christ Church this morning? You can look around take a guess.

How many nations? How many cultures? I can't even begin to parse the complexities of just this little room of people but I think that's directly tied to Isaiah 60 this vision of the city of God this picture of Jerusalem renewed this image of Zion exalted and it shows us this text shows us what it means when the Lord's prayer is answered.

When the kingdom of God comes on the earth as it is in heaven Isaiah 60 says when it does all the nations and all their kings will come to live and worship in the city of God and when they do enemies will be reconciled war will be over there will be no more ethnic divisions everyone will live together in unity and peace it's a vision of the city of God as a place of spiritual brightness and illumination where the light of God's glory is drawing the nations together for their healing and in verse 5 it says then you will look and be radiant your heart will throb and swell with joy why is this such a thrilling and exciting vision because it's a city that no human efforts at urbanization have yet been able to produce it's a city that's built by God and what is the first thing that God does for this city of Zion we're told in verse 4 it says 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 the last of the scattered and exiled children of Abraham are going to be willingly and gently brought from all parts of the world north, south, east, and west the people of God are all going to come and be at home and be at rest with their God but then it gets better it says in verse 5 look and be radiant your heart will throb and swell with joy why?

[16 : 16] because the wealth on the seas will be brought to you to you the riches of the nations will come surprisingly all the Gentile nations will stream to Zion's light they're going to be like moss to the flame of God's glory and it's this great image of a caravan of nations all coming to this one city and as they come they're carrying Zion's exiles home but when they arrive what do they do?

they bring all of their wealth all the abundance of the nations all the finest that they have and they give it to God I love verse 11 it says your gates will always stand open they will never be shut day or night so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations the gates of the city are open 24-7 because the wealth of the nations is being continually hauled through those gates in a constant unending influx of accumulated foreign goods to transform and to glorify the city of God you guys with me so far?

can you mind if I just nerd out for a second on this text? I went to seminary for three years so it's got to be worth something okay? when you hear these places Midian Ifa Sheba Kedar Nebeo Tarshish Lebanon what does that mean to us?

it means nothing to us but these were the seven most important trading centers of the ancient world New York London Shanghai Hong Kong Tokyo Singapore Frankfurt this is where it's at and this is where it's all coming from and I want to explain to you the camels and the ships that are coming from these trading centers in verse 6 the herds of camels will cover your land young camels of Midian and Ephah and all from Sheba will come bearing gold and incense we'll come back to that in a second and proclaiming the praise of the Lord these camel trains were the ships of the desert that came from the east from Arabia and they were symbols of great economic power and mobility and they came bringing what?

gold and incense and then in verse 9 we're told that surely the islands look to me in the lead are the ships of Tarshish bringing your children from afar and with their silver and gold to the honor of the Lord your God the Holy One of Israel for he has endowed you with splendor just as these camels come from the east from Arabia so these ships of Tarshish come from the west from Spain and they're these impressive vessels of transport that bring people and silver and gold through the whole Mediterranean world and it's this image of busy ports endless loading docks crowded scales agents hurrying and scuttling about shipping and receiving it's an image of exotic cultural products in enormous commercial wealth coming flooding and pouring into the city of God and remember who's hearing this vision it's people maybe like you who've given up hope that any sort of quality of life is possible for them anymore these are people who lack sufficient materials to rebuild the temple of God these are a people for as long as they can remember the people of God have been paying imperial tribute to other nations to Assyria to Babylon to the Persians and now here all the goods that have been flowing out from the people of God are somehow miraculously dramatically reversed and flowing back in the light of the glory of God is so filling the people of God that they glow in the dark and they draw all these nations to bring with them their wealth so that the camels of Midian why are they coming in verse 6 they're coming to proclaim the praise of the Lord these ships of Tarshish in verse 9 why are they coming they're coming to honor the Lord the Holy One of Israel all the technological and cultural and military and commercial goods that once were signs of pagan power are here in this moment being cleansed of all their prideful and idolatrous functions to serve a very different purpose all the camels of Arabia all the ships of Tarshish are coming from the east and coming from the west why for the glory of God why all of this luxury and extravagance and prosperity and generosity this vision tells us that just as the kings and queens brought tribute to Solomon so he could build

[21 : 11] Yahweh's first temple now he's doing it again but this time bigger and better you see all these this gold in verse 6 from Sheba is going to beautify the house of the Lord and all that incense is going to make for a fragrant sweet smelling worship to God and these flocks from Kedar in verse 7 these are going to become costly sacrifices on the altar of the Lord to adorn his glorious temple with his merciful substitutionary atonement in verse 13 the timber from Lebanon is going to come and strengthen and adorn the Lord's sanctuary and glorify the place it says where his feet mysteriously walk among us mortals and verse 10 is shocking the nations and the kings are not only going to provide the raw materials but they themselves are going to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty as they begin to build the house of the Lord themselves you see this new city exists for something beyond itself and beyond its own pleasure and self actualization this is a place where every knee can come and bow and every tongue can come and confess that Yahweh the Holy One of Israel is the Savior and Redeemer of the whole world

Isaiah 60 reveals that the world's achievements and wealth and power are destined not for destruction but for transformation that each cultural artifact of every diverse and distinct people group will be put into the service of the glory of God this is a place for all nations and all cultures to come and surrender allegiance with extravagant generosity for the enhancing of God's worship for the building up of the house of the Holy One of Israel for the extending of His kingdom in every direction every culture is bringing their best to worship to worship the Lord and that's why friends that's why we come here every Sunday to bring our unique gifts to bring the best that we have to proclaim the praise of the Lord to put our sacrificial offerings on His altar and to adorn and beautify the glorious temple of His diverse global multicultural international church amen

God's light we're told is going to draw all the nations arise and shine glow in the dark my people because I want to draw all the nations to myself why God's light will draw all nations to know Him as the Savior to know Him as the Savior it's December 19th so some of you may be wondering okay this is great but what does all this have to do with Christmas I want to draw your attention back to verse 6 where it says herds of camels will come from Midian Ephah and Sheba and they're going to come bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord and also verse 14 where it says the children of your oppressors will come bowing before you all who despise you will bow down at your feet and then in verse 16 then you will know that I am the Lord I the Lord am your Savior your Redeemer the Mighty One of Jacob the question with these prophetic texts is always when and where and how is this going to happen and the Gospels tell us the Gospel of Matthew tells us that these wise kings from the east from Arabia they came on camels to the city of Zion and they asked where is the one born king of the Jews and when they finally found him they saw the child and were told in the Gospels that they bowed down and they worshipped him and what did they do they opened their treasures to him and what were the gifts of those Gentile kings presented to him gold incense and myrrh kids you can come study our little nativity set here from Rwanda to see these gifts that these kings have brought to Jesus and why do they give these gifts to him is it because he's such a cute baby these are wise kings who've been seeking the mystery and meaning of the cosmos all their lives these are men who plumb the depths of the wisdom that history and religion and philosophy has to offer and at the end of all their searching they find themselves drawn to this reality from John chapter 1 verse 14 the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us we have seen his glory the glory of the only son who came from the father full of grace and truth why do these kings from the east bow down why do they worship why do they pour out their treasures because here is the word the logos of God the logic of God the deep inner wisdom that made the worlds the logic that is beyond all human logic and that logic of God has been made flesh in a real historical person the divine preexistent eternal all creating lord of nature and of history has become human what mattered has become matter what gives meaning is now material and the life of the universe is embodied in this vulnerable child so that when they see his face they see the face of God and when they look in his eyes

God is looking back at them and when they speak the name of this one who's born from the womb of Mary and birthed in a cave in Bethlehem they're calling on the name of almighty God the word became flesh he made his dwelling among us literally it says the word became flesh and he tabernacled among us he became a temple in our midst so that these words of Isaiah 60 about all the nations streaming to worship at the house of the Lord John 1 tells us that this child is that point of intersection between the timeless and time between heaven and earth between humanity and divinity here the light of the glory of God shines and draws these wise kings from the east they thought to themselves we have gone to extraordinary lengths to get to this cradle but when they get there they only realize that God has gone to extravagant lengths to get into a personal relationship with each one of them and when these kings see in Jesus this God who is full of grace and truth this God who is full of love and faithfulness what do they do they bow down and they worship him and they pour out the best that their culture has to offer if you got on a plane today and you flew to Israel and you went to the church of the nativity in Bethlehem the site of Jesus birth you would find that the door of that church is so small and so low that you're literally forced to stoop down if you want to enter into it it's one of my favorite churches in the whole world you have to bow down to go inside and once you're in there if you want to go to the cave where Jesus was born you have to walk down these steps and you have to bend your head low to get down there and then many people once they get down to that level they bow down on the ground so that they can touch the rocks of that cave and some people just kiss the dirt that's in there and you might think well what's up with all this stooping and bending and bowing well when Isaiah says in verse 16 then you will know that I the Lord your Savior your Redeemer the Mighty One of you no one could have imagined that God was going to empty himself of all of his glory and stoop down as low as a tiny crying baby in a manger to be our

Savior no one could fathom that God would bend as low as a man of sorrows and a friend of sinners to become our Redeemer no one could even conjure up this image of the Mighty One of Jacob bowing down as low as a slave to wash our feet no one could have possibly come up with the idea that God became like us so that he could stretch out his arms to give us a hug and absolutely no one would have ever ever imagined that that God on Good Friday would stretch out those arms on his cross and that the light of the world the light of the glory of God would be plunged into the darkness to bear the weight of our guilt and shame to pay the debt of our selfishness and sin and to die the death that we deserve to die and you see that's the reason we stoop and we bend and we bow as Christians because the Holy One of Israel stooped and bent and bowed to become our Savior and to become our Redeemer and so Christ

[32 : 03] Church that's my prayer for us that we would arise and that we would shine that we would glow in the dark that God would so shine the light of his glory on us the glory of his one and only son that we would become transfigured into brilliant illumined radiant beautiful Christ-like life-giving truth-revealing joy-producing people who in our stooping and our bending and our bowing before God and before other people we would shine the light of God's glory into this world that we would shine the light of God's glory into the city where every people and tribe and nation and tongue could be drawn to this stooping bending and bowing Savior whose light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it this is my prayer in the name of the Father

Son and Holy Spirit Amen