

Rise and shine  
And give God the glory, glory  
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And give God the glory, glory  
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Children of the Lord

Many of you will know this song especially if you have been in church many years or if you have or had young children in church school; it's a staple of Sunday Schools everywhere. I have a confession to make: I hated this song growing up, just couldn't stand it. Every time we sang it in Sunday school, I would either sing it less than enthusiastically or refuse to sing outright. I'm not really sure what it was about it that made it so offensive to my childish ears, maybe it was that I was just being rebellious, hating it for no other reason than because everyone else seemed to be having so much fun singing it. Maybe it was because the rhymes in the verses, which include such poetic masterpieces as (twosies and kangaroosies, roosies) and (arky and gopher barky barky), seemed so contrived. Not at first, but I think there came a point where the happiness of the song conflicted with the seriousness and severity of the biblical story: We tend to celebrate Noah, to lionize him, to elevate him as a Biblical hero, and we should, Noah is faithful to God, he is the creation's metaphoric and in fact literal life boat, this is a story we can be happy about... But if we read the flood narrative for what it is, if we read it closely, it is not a happy event, as much as we simplify and gloss over the story in Sunday School, at the heart of it, it is about the destruction of all of creation, except for those people and animals fortunate to be on Noah's Ark, because of humanity's gross sinfulness. If we think of the context of the story, if we think of the context of the song it's not all that surprising that it was so jarring for me, that the happiness of the song and its joyful command to rise and shine would seem so forced and false...

In our passage from Isaiah today we read the very words (or at least pretty darn close) that make up the chorus of the children's song: Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Isaiah was telling the people of Israel to rise up in joy, to shine out, to celebrate the Lord their God. Like the song the beginning of our passage from Isaiah could be characterized as joyous, as uplifting, as happy.

However, like the context of the song which is rooted in the great flood story, Isaiah's context was equally dire for the nation of Judah. The book of Isaiah is set after the northern kingdom of Israel was taken into exile by the Assyrians and just before the southern kingdom of Judah was to go into exile in Babylon. This was not a good time to be the people of God. Isaiah's prophecy called out Israel's unfaithfulness, its idolatry, its unrighteousness. His prophecy warned them of God's impending judgement upon them, warned them that God would leave them to the mess they had made for themselves, warned them that God would not intervene if they continued their gross unfaithfulness. Isaiah's prophecy was written at a time when the people of Israel would have believed that God had abandoned them, abandoned them to the impending onslaught of the Babylonian armies, abandoned them to exile and ultimately abandoned his covenant with them. Isaiah acknowledges as much in the second verse of our passage: For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples. In this context, Isaiah's exhortation for the people to arise and shine would have seemed hollow, as hollow as the happy verses of the children's song seemed to me...

And yet there is a marked difference between the Sunday school song from my childhood and our passage from Isaiah today. In the song it is pretty clear that we are the source of the action, we arise and shine, we give God the glory, yes I know this is a children's song, I know that this is a song to get kids active and I know that theology in a children's songs is almost always light. But in contrast to the song, in our passage from Isaiah God is the primary actor, God is the one who rises and shines. God is the one who moves, and it is only after he has done so that we are invited to do the same. In the first

verse we hear: that the glory of the Lord has risen upon us. In the second verse following Isaiah's prophecy of world-encompassing darkness we hear: that the Lord will rise upon us, and his glory will appear over us. We hear that Israel will be a light to the nations; that Israel will be radiant, that their hearts will shrill and rejoice; that the nations will stream to Israel, bringing forth their wealth and treasures as offerings to God; and finally we hear that the nations will proclaim the praise of the Lord. All of this was going to be true because God acted, it wasn't because of something that Israel did, it wasn't because Israel was righteous or pure, in fact throughout the book of Isaiah and all of the prophets it is clear that Israel is anything but righteous and pure. It wasn't because they had done great things, because they had achieved their way to God's grace and mercy, no: the light shining upon us, the glory of God rising upon us, the radiance, the joy all these things come to be because of God's action in the world, because God desires for Israel and for us to be in perfect communion with God, to be faithful covenantal partners with God, to live in mutual love. The blessings of God do not come upon Israel or us because of anything we have done, we cannot achieve our way to the grace, mercy and love of God, we can respond, as Isaiah suggests, in joy by rising up, shining forth, sharing the good news of God's mercy and relishing the grace of God secure in the knowledge that there is nothing that we can do to make God love us any more or any less, nothing we can do to pursue God, because after all it is God who pursues us, takes hold of us and does not let us go.

At Christmas and on this the Feast of Epiphany we celebrate what God has done for us and for the world, we celebrate God's light descending into this world of darkness, we celebrate the glory of God rising upon us, we celebrate God coming among us. We celebrate the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Jesus Christ, in God taking on flesh and dwelling among us. Jesus is God's light descending into the world of darkness, Jesus is the glory of God rising upon us, and Jesus is the one who has reconciled us to God, restored us to a right relationship with him. In God's act of sending his Son to live among us, to share our human life as the babe in the manger, God set in motion his plan to reconcile Israel, he set in motion his plan of salvation for all creation, set in motion his plan to free us from the power of Sin forever. On Epiphany we celebrate the God of Israel, not only reconciling his chosen people Israel, but extending his saving light to the ends of the world.

On Epiphany we celebrate the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy as the three Gentile wise men come to witness to light of the world, embodied in Jesus Christ. And as our passage from Isaiah prophecies, they bring gold and frankincense and proclaim the praise of the Lord. On this day we celebrate the moment when we as Gentile Christians, like the three wise men before us, are invited to join God's grand narrative of salvation for Israel, and respond as Israel was called on to respond with joy, radiance, we are called to rise and shine! We are called to continue to be a light to the nations, continue to shine forth so that more and more people would come to know the grace, mercy and love of God in Jesus Christ. We are called to lives shaped by the reconciliation that God has enacted in Jesus, to live lives that respond faithfully to what God has already done for us, and what God continues to do in the active work and ministry of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and the universal Church.

As we begin this calendar year, let us at Grace Church Scarborough, as followers of Jesus, as members of His body shine forth His light into the world, let us rise up sharing the good news of his kingdom in word and deed, not because we have resolved to do it, not under our own power or direction, but because God has acted, because the glory of God has arisen upon the world, because his light is shining forth and he invites all of us to participate in the renewal and reconciliation of the world! Arise, shine: for your light has come! Thanks be to God