

Radiant Faith

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Isaiah 60: 1-6
Radiant Faith

On Christmas Day Patrice and I flew back to Pennsylvania to spend three days visiting our families. We arrived in Allentown in time for dinner at my sister's house and enjoyed a relaxing evening with my mom, my two siblings, and my niece and nephew. After dinner on the way back from my sister's to my mother's house, we decided to drive through some of the residential neighborhoods looking at the Christmas lights. It was something we always enjoyed doing with the family when we were kids, and it turned out to be just as enjoyable as adults.

It was beautiful seeing the effort people had taken to illuminate their homes and yards for Christmas. Some of the displays were so elaborate that you could see the glow from blocks away. Some were elegant, some were garish, some were coordinated in aesthetically beautiful ways, some displayed the evolution of outdoor lighting technologies throughout the years, some were thematically unified, some combined all religious and cultural icons of Christmas including the Nativity scene, Santa Clause, Frosty the Snowman, and the Grinch. No two displays were the same and if there was one particularly elaborate display it seemed to inspire all the neighboring houses on the block to bump up their displays a notch or two.

As we drove through the modest, middle class neighborhoods on the Northwest side of Allentown, I was struck by how incredibly comforting it was to see all the neighborhoods illuminated in the dark night, and how incredibly out of character it is for these modest, Pennsylvania Dutch families. These are people who share the same cultural and religious heritage that gave us the Amish and Old Order Mennonites. They are modest

people. They live in modest homes, drive modest cars, wear modest clothes and live modest lifestyles. They are simple, unadorned, no frills people.

Except during the Christmas season! Suddenly during the weeks between Thanksgiving and New Years, they get inspired to put up elaborate outdoor lighting displays and illuminate their properties for Christmas. And not for their own enjoyment; they don't even see the lights when they are inside their homes. They put up their Christmas lights to inspire others, people like us who were driving through their neighborhoods on a quiet Christmas night.

They aren't deeply religious people, but all of their Christmas lighting displays were inspired by the same religious event: the incarnation of God's love in the birth of Jesus Christ. Even with all of the crazy cultural traditions that get added to the mix, the birth of Jesus inspires simple, ordinary folk to become radiant, to illuminate the darkness with elaborate lighting displays that convey messages of hope, peace, love and joy. And even where there isn't a single religious icon anywhere in the display, all of the cultural themes of Christmas are also rooted in the same gospel of Jesus Christ: recovering the innocence of childhood, rekindling love, renouncing materialism, restoring generosity.

Today in our sacred text we heard the prophet Isaiah summoning his people shouting, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." We read those ancient words of the prophet every year at Epiphany, the festival that comes 12 days after Christmas commemorating the arrival of the magi and revelation of the Light of Christ to the world. They are appropriate words for this season because we believe that Jesus was the "light of the world." But Isaiah wasn't talking about Jesus. He wrote those words more than 5 centuries before Jesus was born. He wasn't saying, "Jesus will be your light when he comes into the world." Isaiah was telling

the Hebrew people in his day that the glory of the Lord had risen upon them, that they were the light shining in the darkness, that they should be radiant so that others would see the light of God shining in them and be inspired to give glory to God as well.

These were not showy people Isaiah was addressing. They weren't wealthy or powerful or devout. They were long suffering people, people who had endured forty years of exile in Babylon, people who had experienced the humiliation of being conquered and plundered and brutalized and enslaved. When they were finally set free and allowed to return to Jerusalem, their ancestral home bore no semblance of its ancient glory. It was in ruins, destroyed by the siege, left with no two stones standing on top of each other.

Imagine the audacity of Isaiah telling these broken and downtrodden people that they should be radiant, that the light of God had risen upon them, that they were to shine, not for their own sake, but to be a light to the nations so that others might be inspired to give God glory through them.

But that is exactly what happened. A man named Nehemiah, who had a comfortable job serving in the court of the Persian King, took Isaiah's words to heart and decided to return to Jerusalem and allow the light of God to shine through his efforts to rebuild the ancient city. And lo and behold, the love of God was so radiant in Nehemiah's life that he inspired others to join him, and their radiance began to shine and they inspired others, and their radiance began to shine and they inspired others...and through the inspired work of many hands a new Jerusalem was rebuilt from the ancient ruins.

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...be radiant and your heart shall thrill and rejoice." That is the message of Epiphany. Arise,

shine...be radiant.

Wednesday evening on our way home from the airport, we stopped at the Common Grill in Chelsea for dinner to celebrate our 34th wedding anniversary. We were both tired from traveling and weary from three very full days of visiting with our families. We didn't get the restaurant until after 8:30. Most of the dinner crowd had finished by then. The wait staff had already served two seating's and I know I'm not at my best at the tail end of a full workday. But our waiter was radiant that evening. He was eager to serve us, attentive to our needs, dedicated to doing everything in his power to insure that we had an enjoyable evening at his table. The medication I've been taking for a pinched nerve in my neck had run out and I was pretty uncomfortable sitting at the table, but the waiter's radiance distracted me from my pain and enabled my wife and I to enjoy a wonderful anniversary dinner together. Arise, shine...be radiant.

Friday morning I found myself in the company of a radiant couple who are preparing for marriage. They have both been on their own for a long time. They are both mature, thoughtful, independent people. They aren't infatuated with each other, but their love is radiant. It shines in their faces and is displayed in their affectionate gestures, their respectful conversations, their attentive gazes. As I listened to them share the story of how their love for each other blossomed in their relationship, I found myself feeling joyful, lighthearted and encouraged. Arise, shine...be radiant.

Late on Friday evening I was sitting with a family in the hospital waiting room while a loved was undergoing emergency surgery. Early in the morning a young neurosurgeon came out of the OR and shared news about the surgery with the family. He was radiant, not just because he had encouraging news to share but because the light of God was shining through him. He had studied and

mastered a new technique for removing blood clots in the brain and he knew that his work was facilitating the miracle of healing. He spoke modestly but confidently about what he was able to do in the surgery, and all of us felt deeply inspired by his radiance. He was calming and comforting and left us feeling hopeful. Arise, shine...be radiant.

The light of God's love shone brightly in Jesus, but it shines no less brightly in us. As Tom and Emily Joye reminded us on Christmas day, John's nativity story tells us that Christmas didn't begin and end with the birth of Jesus. The light of God has been shining in the darkness since the first day of creation and continues to shine in us today. When Jesus first gathered his disciples, before he had taught them anything, he said to them, "you are the light of the world, let your light so shine before others that they see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Allowing the light of God to shine in your life isn't a skill that you have to learn or a talent you have to develop or a special calling that you have to receive. It is a decision that you have to make. You just have to decide every day, in whatever you are doing, to allow the love of God to be radiant in you.

So this week as you unplug the Christmas lights for the last time, and take down the displays, and haul the tree down to the basement or out to the curb, do so resolving to allow the love of God to be radiant in your life every day. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...be radiant and your heart shall thrill and rejoice." Amen.

