

REFLECTORS OF LIGHT

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Isaiah 60:1-6
John 1:1-14

January 4, 2026

On this gloomy first Sunday of a New Year, a day that was preceded by several gloomy days and will likely be followed by additional gloomy days, the prophet Isaiah comes to us saying, *"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you"* (Isaiah 60:1). Perhaps more than a few of you this morning are fighting back the urge to say, "Put a sock in it Isaiah, you obviously know nothing about NE Ohio!" After all, where exactly is the light? As we look around, what we see is the current gloom of cloudy, cold days compounded by the gloomy darkness of winter's long nights and on top of that there is the dark reality of large numbers of people in this world who are living in poverty and fear, who are hungry, homeless, sick and vulnerable to the apathy, greed, and violence of the powerful. "Get real, Isaiah, look around!" We have good reason these days not to be in the mood to rise and shine. If the "glory of the Lord has risen upon us," then shouldn't it be easier for us to see it?

I have a feeling the people of Isaiah's day were thinking just about the same thing when Isaiah first instructed them to "Arise and shine." That year was about 537 BC and the exiled Babylonian Jews were returning home. King Cyrus of Persia had conquered Babylon about two years earlier and he was allowing them to go back to Judah. Many of them had been born in Babylon during the 70-year period of exile, so they had never personally seen their homeland of Judah and the great city of Jerusalem. But for years, those exiles had heard story after story told by their parents and grandparents – stories about the peace and prosperity of Judah, stories about the beauty of the land and the magnificence of Jerusalem's Temple. Those exiles returned home with such high expectations, but what they discovered upon their return was ruin, decay and corruption.

Those exiles returned with excitement and hope for what awaited them only to have their hopes crushed by the discouraging state of reality. When the country's leaders in government and business, as well as educators, skilled artisans and spiritual leaders were all forced to re-locate to Babylon 70 years earlier, those left behind did not have the skills, training, or the resources required to run the government, to educate the young, to see to the spiritual health of the community that was left behind. So instead of health, glory and wealth, they found a mess in Jerusalem – the destroyed temple had not been rebuilt, buildings were crumbling all over the city, incompetent and corrupt authorities were in charge, and there was a terrible apathy in the nation's religious practice – faith seemed to be in short supply in Judah. The exiled returnees were devastated, and their hopes were crushed.

It was at that time of huge disappointment and heightened despair that Isaiah spoke, inviting them to embrace a different reality than what their eyes were seeing. *"Arise, shine.... For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick*

darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and the glory will appear over you," (Isaiah 60:1-2). Those children, young men and women who were torn away from their families as spoils of war have finally returned home, and Isaiah tells them that joy and prosperity are close at hand. In fact, this future vision will be even better and more joyous than what they are currently able to see and imagine, because the homecoming will extend beyond Judah as all people are drawn to the light of God.

"Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn," says Isaiah. So, "lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you..." (Isaiah 60:3-4). Isaiah describes to the exiles how others will see the light and come to the nation of Israel in a unified act of tribute to God. They will come not because the nation is large, threatening, powerful, and wealthy, but because it is clear to everyone that Israel is a people of God. Instead of being under the control of foreign rule, all will be able to see that the nation is in God's care. This reality will not only be visible but inspiring for all who see it. People both near and far will recognize God's presence and will be drawn to the light of God. By way of these prophetic words, the prophet Isaiah asks a discouraged and despairing people to stand tall, and to confront their darkness, and to then shine with the light of faith and hope. Why? Because in the days and years ahead, the light of God's glory can and will overcome the darkness that is sin and despair and as it does, others will notice and be drawn to it.

On this gloomy first Sunday of a New Year and following our yearly celebration of welcoming the "*The true light, which enlightens everyone...*" (John 1:9), we are invited to consider the relevancy of Isaiah's prophesy for us living in this day. What does it look and feel like to "rise and shine" amidst the reality of our current world and its darkness? What does it mean that God's Light appeared to us by way of a flesh and blood baby two thousand years ago, and then that embodied Light grew up, teaching us and showing us by his example what it looks like when the glory of God shines and God's Kingdom is revealed through the power of love. We know that embodied Light suffered and died and was buried in a tomb, and yet the Light remained with us and continued to shine. This is the Light that pierces the deepest of darkness – a Light that darkness will never be able to extinguish (John 1:5).

The presence of God in the world is an invitational challenge for all people of faith to "Arise and shine." This faithful response of shining amidst all evidence to the contrary is proof that God's presence in and through us is not only noticeable to others, but it also makes a difference in the world. This shining light of God's people, this sharing of hope and making a difference in every age is possible only as God's people reflect the One who is the true Light of God's glory.

This time of the year, we just naturally live amidst a lot of physical darkness. During these dark days and as snow covers the ground, I am reminded of the importance of reflectors positioned along both sides of my driveway. Those of you who have been to the church parsonage know that the driveway is curved. Those reflectors not only help us to maneuver an oddly shaped driveway correctly when there is a blanket of snow covering the

driveway, they are absolutely essential for the snowplow. Those reflectors have no source of light in and of themselves – they simply reflect the light that is directed at them. Similarly, God's people do not generate light, but by the grace of God we are effective reflectors of God's light.

"Lift up your eyes and look around.." (Isaiah 60:4). The glory of the Lord is present, but we have to be looking up and around to be aware of and see that light. Amid the dark realities of life, a darkness that can sometimes feel overwhelming, we can fail to see the light if we are not looking for it and if we are not being it. Sometimes, it's the busyness of the holiday season that is very distracting, and when we arrive at this time following the celebration of Jesus' birth, we realize that we have both failed to see and to reflect the Light of the world. At other times, it might be the discouragement of the angry, divisive, cruel days in which we live that make it difficult to lift our eyes and see beyond a discouraging existence to the glory of the Lord revealed in Jesus. Isaiah's proclamation to the returned exiles and to all of us who find ourselves living in dark and despairing days is a word of hope and a word of challenge.

To live as reflectors of God's Light amidst the gloom and darkness of our current days is to insert the clarity of faith and the power of hope for the purpose of bringing about a future that is markedly different and better than the present. Sometimes, this reflecting of God's Light will stir up controversy because light has a way of calling attention to things others may not really want to see like those who are hungry and sick, poor and oppressed, homeless and imprisoned, neglected and abused, helpless and hopeless – people who when we take time to not only look at them closely but also walk beside them, we discover that they reflect the very presence of Jesus. *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,"* said Jesus (Matthew 25:40). So, now that we have once again acknowledged the revealing of God's Light through the presence and power of God's Incarnate love, it's time for us to be reflectors of God's Light. So, as our choir anthem said so beautifully, it is time, *"To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations; to bring peace... and to make music..."* ("The Work of Christmas" by Dan Forrest).

It's not easy to be a reflector of Light when surrounded by darkness, but the world of Isaiah's time as well as our time is sure in need of the Light that is the love of Christ. In every age, people of faith and hope are needed to look up and around while standing together. As we enter 2026, we do so during a time of deep divides – political, economic, cultural divides that can be so frustrating and discouraging. We might even feel at times like darkness is winning and that we are standing alone. But we are not! The Light of the glory of God has arisen, and *"we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14). John the Baptist testified to the light and every time people of faith dare to shine and to be the Light of Christ's love and grace amidst the dark and sinful realities of indifference, hate, revenge, murder, greed, and injustice, we also testify to that light.

We stand today at the beginning of a new year, and instead of focusing our time and attention on a resolution that has to do with eating better and

exercising more, might we instead be resolved in our commitment to shine the Light of Christ. What act of loving kindness and compassionate care might you commit yourself to at your home, school, workplace, community, or the greater Cleveland area? Consider how you might be a reflector of Christ's light by making a thoughtful, positive, helpful and possibly transformational difference in someone else's life in the months ahead. As we each prepare ourselves for Holy Communion with the One who is God's true light and our salvation, I can think of no better way to prepare ourselves than to commit ourselves to the work of Christmas, to the work of shining the light of Christ.

The Lord, Jesus invites all who seek to know and follow him, all who desire to reflect his light into the world, to come to him and be fed and enlightened by his presence. So let us prepare ourselves for a holy encounter as we open our hearts and begin by joining our voices in confession...