



Act One: Darkness

Imagine a family that is forced to evacuate their home because a category 5 hurricane is bearing down on them. When the storm eventually passes, they return to their home, only to find it completely destroyed. They sit in the ruins and weep, feeling utterly hopeless.

If you can put yourself into that story and feel the despair, then you can understand the context of today's scripture reading from Isaiah. The residents of Jerusalem had to evacuate their city because a hurricane had come. That hurricane was called Assyria, a brutal enemy who conquered the city and took many of its residents back to Assyria as prisoners of war. Years later some of those prisoners were set free to return to their homes in Jerusalem, but what they found was total destruction. Their homes and their beloved city lay in ruins. They sat down in those ruins and wept, feeling utterly hopeless.

And it was into that hopelessness that Isaiah proclaimed these powerful words:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. – Isaiah 60:1-5

Isaiah is saying, "I know you feel hopeless. I know you sit in ruins. I know you're struggling in the darkness with despair. But open your eyes. God is at work. The light of God's presence is dawning. Do you have eyes to see it? Arise and shine, for your light has come." Isaiah was planting seeds of hope into the fertile soil of Israel's despair.

And here we are on one of the darkest days of the year. But it isn't just the lack of sunlight that makes these dark and difficult days. It's also the brokenness of this world in which we live. Cancer. Sex trafficking. The heroin crisis. Political gridlock. Grinding poverty. The refugee crisis. The war in Syria. Environmental degradation. It can all leave us feeling like a hurricane has descended upon us and has blown away our sense of security, hope and joy. In this present darkness we, too, are in need of a word of hope.

Act Two: Light

Remember that family sitting in the ruins of their hurricane-stricken home, weeping and hopeless? Imagine that a man walks into the rubble, their insurance agent. He pulls out a copy of their insurance policy and shows them that they are fully covered. He promises that their home will be rebuilt and that all their belongings will be replaced. It won't be long, he tells them, until they are safe at home again. In that moment nothing has changed. They are still surrounded by the rubble that was once their home. And yet in that moment everything has changed. Hope has dawned in the shape of a promise.

"Arise, shine, for your light has come. The glory of the Lord has risen upon you." That was the promise that Isaiah proclaimed into the darkness and despair of God's people so many years ago, and it changed everything. It gave them hope to carry on.

And that very same promise is spoken into our darkness. John's Gospel puts it this way:

In the beginning Christ already existed. Christ was with God, and Christ was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. Christ gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.... The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. – John 1:1-5, 9

That is the promise of Advent. Advent is a season that stirs our hope that into the darkness of this world a light is dawning. And that light has a name: Jesus. Jesus is the light of God's promised love and presence born into our lives and into our world. And no matter how deep the darkness, the darkness can never extinguish the light. Or, as St. Paul once put it, "I am convinced that neither, neither death nor life...nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." Though the darkness of this world remains, the light of that promise changes everything. It gives us hope to carry on.

Act Three: Arise! Shine!

Let's return to that hurricane-stricken family one more time. Though they are surrounded by the ruins of their home, they now live in the hope of a promise – a promise that their home will be rebuilt. And so they rise. They get up out of the ruins of their home. They lift their eyes and see their neighbors who are also sitting in the ruins of their homes. And so they begin to walk around, comforting the distressed, helping others sort through the rubble, sharing a word of encouragement, praying for the grieving. That is the power of hope. It compels us forward.

"Arise, shine, for your light has come." What's so remarkable about Isaiah's words is that they are a command spoken into the darkness. Even in the darkness the people were to rise up, to lift their gaze above their challenges, to search for the evidence of God's presence and activity as someone might search the horizon for signs of the dawn after a long and difficult night. And not only that but even in the darkness Isaiah commands the people to shine – to reflect a hope that defies the darkness. And why? Because they dare to believe that the light has come.

This season of Advent doesn't just stir our hope that even in this present darkness the light of Christ is dawning. It compels us to arise and shine despite the darkness. That's why we provide hope and wholeness for all people. That's why we come alongside the children, seniors and people in poverty. That's why we feed starving children. That's why we gather to worship. That's why we come together in small groups. That's why we give generously. That is the source of our joy. That's why in all that we say and do we share the promise that has been given to us – that the light of God's love and presence is dawning in Jesus the Christ. The light has come.

So, arise Prince of Peace. Shine people of God. Though we dwell in darkness, the Light has come. And that promise changes everything. It gives us hope to carry on.