

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!” Arise. Shine. Light. Glory. I’m pretty sure that these 4 verbs can be used to describe God for us in one way or another, especially the last two words. Around this time of year, for example, we often connect Light with God sending Jesus into the darkness of our world. And this is something we can easily relate to because we all want light in our lives, especially during these dark winter days. Looking back to yesterday, we had only 8 hours and 31 minutes of daylight here in Mount Vernon. But the days are getting slightly longer, and by the end of the month we’ll hopefully have around 10 hours of light each day.

But what about glory? The prophet Isaiah tells us that “the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” We want glory as well, but for many of us, it is a word that is not as clear to us as the idea of the absence of darkness. Just exactly what is glory, and where can we find it?

Glory is majestic beauty and splendor, such as the glory of bright stars on a crystal-clear winter night. We say that we give someone glory for producing a gorgeous work of art. We sometimes experience glory as a bright and powerful light, such as when shepherds were living in fields around Bethlehem, and “an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”

But the simplest and clearest definition of glory is offered by a Christian writer named Frederick Buechner: Glory is God’s style. When the Bible tells us that “the heavens are telling the glory of God,” it is saying that the heavens are revealing God’s style: sunsets, starry nights, rainbows, dust storms, rainforests, the human face — all, says Buechner, are “unmistakably the work of a single hand.” God’s style!

Today we celebrate the fact that God’s style was revealed to the world when the wise men made their visit to baby Jesus. Matthew tells us that they followed a

bright star to Bethlehem, and “on entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage” — they gave him glory. The wise men were the first to see that Jesus reveals the grace and love of God to the world in a bright and unmistakable way. They saw with their very own eyes a child who will grow up to show God’s style in everything he says and does.

So Epiphany is all about the glory of God being revealed to the world. But what is the effect of this glory on us? Light, beauty, splendor, and style don’t mean much unless they have a positive effect. Research shows that glory is good for us. Similarly being a fan of a sports team, in particular, can have a positive effect on us as well. According to an April issue of *The Atlantic* magazine a landmark study from 1976 described fans’ tendency to embrace a winning team as “basking in reflected glory” — the key is having an experience of “glory.”

Researchers found that after a win, it was extremely common for fans to wear hats and shirts connected to the winning team. They also seem to claim credit for their team’s success through pronouns used in their conversations, describing the team as “we” instead of “they” — as in “*We* are the champions!” In addition similar studies have revealed that being a fan of a sports team can ward off depression and feelings of alienation. Much of this is due to the strong bonds that develop among fans, so apparently good things can come from “basking in reflected glory.”

The Prophet Isaiah, in our first lesson this morning was writing to God’s people in a time of deep darkness, one that was even gloomier than a January night. He promised that although thick darkness was covering the people, something good was about to happen: “The Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.” Yes, Israel’s situation was very much like a team that’s down six points with three seconds left on the clock. But God tells Israel to look for a Hail Mary pass and a two-point conversion! Glory!

Of course, we know that God did not enter human life as a quarterback with a golden arm. God appeared as a vulnerable baby, with a mother and a father on the run from an evil King named Herod. Isaiah sensed how God was going to come to earth, which is why he said, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” And of course, we typically think of these words when we sing the popular Christmas carol “We Three Kings.”

Isaiah knew that these visitors would “bring gold and frankincense” and “proclaim the praise of the Lord.” We remember these words when we sing, “Born a king on Bethlehem’s plain, gold I bring to crown him again . . . Frankincense to offer have I; incense owns a Deity nigh.” The words of Isaiah come together with one of our favorite hymns to help us bask in the reflected glory of Jesus, the baby of Bethlehem — a child who is the clearest possible example of God’s style.

But as we sing that song we may begin to wonder, what happens to us when we experience this glory? What happens is that we discover that Jesus is the light of the world. As the light of the world: Jesus —Drives away sin, isolation and despair; Gives us the gift of forgiveness; Gives us the gift of Christian connection; Gives us the promise of eternal life; Changes our attitude to the world around us; and Invites us into the reign of God.

On the day of Epiphany, or whenever we celebrate it (like on a Sunday morning that follows the actual day) we remember the coming of the light of Christ into the world, a light that drives away the darkness of sin, isolation and despair. With Jesus, we have the gift of forgiveness whenever we fall into destructive behavior or wander into the dark ways of life. With Jesus, we have the gift of Christian connection — with Christ and with each other — whenever we become isolated or alienated from others.

Jesus also gives us the promise of everlasting life, which can ward off depression and despair. “You shall see and be radiant,” promises Isaiah; “your

heart shall thrill and rejoice.” When the light of Christ illuminates our lives, we realize that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. But Christ’s light does more than make us feel good. It also changes our attitude toward the world around us. In the early 60s, the Christian author C.S. Lewis was known to have said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

Jesus helps us to see the world in a new light, one that reveals that the people around us are not our enemies or opponents. They are human beings made in the image and likeness of God. The light of Christ gives us strategies for navigating challenges, such as forgiving instead of punishing, and working for the common good instead of our narrow self-interest. Jesus invites us to see ourselves not as members of a particular family, or community or nation, but as citizens of the glorious kingdom of God.

When we walk in the glory of the light of Christ, we discover that the goal of our lives is not to earn the most money, win the most awards, close the most deals, or accumulate the most possessions. Instead, it is to be the most authentic men and women that God created us to be. The goal of our lives is to be full human beings, standing in the presence of our loving Lord.

Of course, we shouldn’t forget about the first pair of words I mentioned earlier; arise and shine. Thankfully, however, they can help me with the “now what?” part of my message — the call to action. In other words, what should we be doing with the light and glory that God pours out upon us? Well...when we experience the light of God, and are covered with the glory of God, we cannot help but arise and shine.

Let’s return briefly to another sports metaphor: Imagine you’re watching your favorite team with your friends. You all have sodas in your hands and

popcorn in your laps. The Seconds are ticking by. Time is running out. Then, suddenly, inexplicably, against all odds, on the final play, somebody begins to run from his own 8-yard line. He reaches the 25, and then, with a head and shoulder fake, he's at the 30. He zigs and he zags. He eludes a tackle, and cuts in the opposite direction and makes it to the 40. Seeing an opening, he scoots to the 50, and then it's a foot race to the end zone 50 yards away.

Only one defender can possibly reach him. The question is whether your player still has gas in the tank. It's going to be close. And then at the 3-yard line, less than 10 feet from the goal line, he trips. Sensing that he's going down, he uses one leg to leap forward, stretching high and long, the football in his hands. He falls on the goal line and the ball is in the end zone. Touchdown!

Here is the pertinent question we should be asking ourselves: At what point of this 92-yard run did you arise and shine? Nobody, no true fan, could watch this without standing up and hollering. Impossible! No person could fail to leap to their feet and start screaming at the television — which we all know is an inanimate object!

When the glory of the Lord is upon us, there's no way that we should be sitting on our hands. Truth is, most likely popcorn's going to be all over the place, and the floor is going to be soaked and sitcky with soda or other beverages. We will be shouting from our rooftops because God has come to us. And today as we celebrate the reveling of Immanuel, "God with us" to the nations we are reminded that our salvation is here! So, arise and shine! The light and glory of God are upon us! Amen.