

## January 3 - Epiphany Sunday

Scripture: Isaiah 60: 1-6    Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon: Arise! Shine!

I don't know how many times I have talked about how we need to reflect the light of God. This year I did just a bit of research into the physics of reflection. What I learned got me thinking about this challenge to reflect the light of God in a whole new way. There are basically two types of reflection, specular and diffuse. Specular reflection is what happens when you look into a mirror. The light striking the shiny surface reflects directly back and you get a clear, but reverse image. Diffuse reflection happens when light hits a rough surface. The light reflects in all directions and so there is no reflective image. The freer the surface is from blemishes the more accurate the reflection. Now this got me to thinking. Imagine our lives to be a reflective surface. The light of the love of God strikes it. Do we, by our actions and lives present a smooth reflective surface so others can see that light of love? Or is ours a pitted and flawed surface that only imperfectly reflects God's light and love? That idea changes, for me, what I feel I am called to do when I am asked reflect the light of God.

Let me tell you what I mean. In Isaiah we have this command to "Arise and Shine." Jerusalem had been through difficult and challenging times. The city had been captured by the Babylonians. Many of its citizens had been taken into captivity. Later they had been allowed to return but it had been a difficult task to rebuild the walls, hang the gates and restore the temple. It would be easy for them to feel that God had abandoned them. They are told the darkness that has covered them is over. God's glory will appear over you and nations will come to your light. But we know it is not of their making but the reflected light of God. They will be radiant. All will see God is at work. All will come proclaiming the Lord's praises. It is this passage that seems to predict the coming of the wise men later to offer their gifts to the baby Jesus.

If we hear this command to "Arise and Shine" being meant for us today as much as it was meant for the people of Jerusalem so long ago I have to ask, "What are the things that can mar the surface of our lives and keep us from shining?" Going back to

my physics I am reminded that any imperfection affects the quality of the reflection. When the Hubble space telescope was manufactured the mirror in it was to be the best ever made. It took over a year to grind and polish the surface. Yet when the first images came back they were fuzzy. It was found that one of the measurements used in the grinding was off 1.3 millimeters. So the discrepancy was about 1/50<sup>th</sup> the thickness of a piece of paper! Yet without corrective lenses installed by a later space mission we would never have gotten the fantastic views from Hubble.

Put that into our lives and it says that any defect matters. They keep us from accurately reflecting the light of God. Yes, any good deed reflects God's light but if we are to do all we can to reflect that love it is going to take some work. So what are some of the flaws we need to grind off of our surface? Jesus mentioned many in his parables and teachings. Fake religiosity was something he condemned in the Pharisees. We would say they talked the talk but didn't walk the walk. Where do we say all the right things but fail to live them out? These deflect God's light. Some of the ways Jesus identified people as not living their faith was an unwillingness to forgive. Remember how, when asked how many times we should forgive someone he said, "seventy times seven." So, one of the ways to be a more reflective surface this year is to forgive old grievances. Let's not take them into the new year. Another thing Jesus challenged was legalism. When people are more concerned about following the rules, always as they define the rules, instead of trying to live out the spirit of Jesus' command to love, they are not doing well. Polish the surface of your life by embracing where the Spirit leads instead of being so concerned about what is right, by your definition. One more attitude that Jesus challenged in the religious folk of his day was status seeking. Grasping for pride of place or status was something he condemned. So again, if you see in the self-examination of your life places where you have felt wounded because your efforts were not recognized, work at releasing them. Remember that we are called to be servants and the more we can be in that attitude the more clearly we reflect the light of God.

So I think you can see the problem. When we have people proclaiming to be Christians and yet what the world sees is unforgiving, legalistic, status seekers, they get turned off. They think, if this is what it means to be a Christian I want nothing to do with

it. So all of us have some work to do to grind the surface of our life and to challenge others.

I don't want to end on a negative note so let me also point out what is the polishing cloth that makes our lives reflect the light in the best possible way. We have mentioned one already. It is the path of servanthood. When we do this we truly reflect the light of Christ. In the parable of the sheep and the goats remember that those who were blessed were those who fed the hungry, gave a cup of cold water to the thirsty, and visited the sick, to mention a few. They didn't do it for recognition; they did it out of love. Yet God notices and the world notices and the light of God shines brightly. We just learned that the Catholic Church is going to elevate Mother Theresa to sainthood. Hers was a life of service to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. So servanthood and compassion polish the surface of our lives. Think of ways you can be in such service this day.

Another polishing stone is learning. You might be surprised about that. John Wesley the founder of Methodism praised reason or learning. Jesus praised Mary when she quit bustling about and spent some time learning from him. When we pause to learn we hear God anew. We are challenged, we are reminded what is truth and it transforms us. People notice when we start studying the Bible and our faith and put it into practice.

And of course the greatest polishing compound is that of love. As the Apostle Paul would say in his letter to the Corinthians, without love anything else we do is meaningless. The unconditional love of Christ challenges us to do all the things we have been talking about. We are to love and forgive instead of holding a grudge. We are to empathize with a person where they are in their life journey and the decisions they made instead of pointing out all the wrongs they have done. Some want to say but we need to hold people accountable. Jesus was more concerned about loving people into newness of life instead of legislating its occurrence. We are to love people enough to serve just as Jesus took a basin and washed his disciple's feet. We are to love so much that we see the needs of those around us and try to help. And we are to love ourselves so much that we continue to learn and grow so we can be all God wants us to be. When

we act this way we are grinding off the flaws and polishing the surface and we are living out the admonition of Isaiah. We are arising and shining.

Think about those who have shone the light of Christ most brightly for you by their lives. For me, one of those people was named Grace and she certainly lived up to her name. She became a mentor and teacher to me in my teens about what it means to be a person of faith. She had gone through many challenging things in her life. Her marriage came unraveled a few years into it. Her husband, she found out, was an alcoholic. He had hidden his drinking from her while courting. But after marriage he began to drink excessively and became abusive. She had no choice but to leave with their daughter. She legally separated from him but never divorced him. She remained in contact and prayed for him daily. Some 40 years later when he died on Skid Road in Seattle she paid for his cremation. She never had much money and lived on Social Security but was always the first one to come to my father with a few dollars when she saw a need. Her daughter lived across the country and so she only rarely saw her or her grandchildren. Her daughter blamed her for her dad being the way he was. Yet she would write her weekly and the grandchildren as well, even when she rarely heard anything. She also was part of a study group at the church for 50 years. Even though she was the most knowledgeable person in the group she rarely led it feeling that her role was to support and train others. Her quiet servant's heart challenged me as to what true Christian faith is like. To forgive daily for 40 years, to reach out when rejected, to give when you have very little and to serve and learn, what a lesson. She gave me a Bible when my father was reassigned. I still have it and treasure it as a reminder of one who walked the walk and didn't just talk the talk.

So we have defects to work on getting rid of this year and we have activities we need to be engaged in to make us all that God would want us to be.