

The joy of glory. Research shows that glory is good for you. For example: being a fan of a sports team can have positive effects. According to *The Atlantic* magazine (April 2018), a landmark 1976 study 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, fans are more likely than usual to wear hats and shirts connected to the winning team. They claimed credit for the team's success through the pronouns they used in conversation, describing the team as "we" instead of "they," as in "We are the champions!" Researchers also found that sports fans tend to remember victories much more clearly than they remember defeats.

Studies reveal that being a fan of a sports team can ward off depression and feelings of alienation. Rooting for the home team can build a sense of genuine community and stimulate self-worth. Much of this is due to the strong bonds that develop among fans, but sports worship also provides individuals with strategies for overcoming emotional challenges. Good things come from "basking in reflected glory."

Isaiah wrote to God's people in a time of deep darkness, one that was even gloomier than a Minnesota winter night. The Babylonians conquered God's people and led them into captivity. This defeat seemed to negate all of God's promises to Israel. But Isaiah promised the people that although thick darkness covered them, something good was about to happen: "*The Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you*" (v. 2). Team Israel was down six points with three seconds on the clock, but God tells Israel to look for a Hail Mary pass and a two-point conversion! God's style, God's glory would soon be revealed.

Of course, we know that God did not enter human life as a quarterback with a golden arm. God appeared as a helpless baby, with a mother and a father on the run from the intrigues of King Herod. Isaiah knew how God would come to earth, which is why he said, "*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn*" (v. 3).

We think of these words when we sing "We Three Kings." Isaiah knew that these visitors would "*bring gold and frankincense*" and "*proclaim the praise of the Lord*" (v. 6). 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 carols to help us bask in the reflected glory of Jesus, the baby of Bethlehem, a child who is the best example of God's style.

The light of the world. But what happens to *us* when we experience this glory? What happens is that we discover that *Jesus is the light of the world*. At Epiphany, 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 dark ways of life. With Jesus, we have the gift of Christian connection — with Christ and with each other — whenever we feel isolated or alienated.

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*" (v. 5). When the light of Christ illuminates our lives, we realize that nothing in all creation will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).

But Christ's light does more than make us feel good. It also changes our attitude toward the world around us. In the early 1960s, the Christian author C.S. Lewis said to the Oxford Socratic Club, "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 our competitors. They are our brothers and sisters, 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 one family or community or nation, but as citizens of the glorious Kingdom of God.

"Jesus invites us into the reign of God," says Episcopal priest Peter Wallace. This is the eternal kingdom "that encourages and provokes authenticity, that calls us to become fully human beings before the face 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 faithful 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.

Arise and shine. When we experience the light of God and are covered with the glory of God, we cannot help but arise, and shine. Returning to our sports analogy: you're on the couch watching the Vikings with friends. You have your pop or your beer, some spicy

wings, chips, and pizza. Seconds are ticking down. Time is running out. The Quarterback is having a hard time rallying his team. The Vikings are on defense, being pushed into their own zone.

Then, suddenly, inexplicably, against all odds, on the final play, the running back gets the ball and 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 he 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.

Nobody, no true fan, could watch this play without standing up and hollering. It's not possible. So, here's my question: at what point of this 92-yard run did you arise, and shine? When did you leap to your feet and start screaming at the television, as if your hollering could somehow propel your team to victory?

When the glory of the Lord is upon us, there's no way we can sit on our hands or on the bench and watch. Truth is, there will be popcorn and chips flying going to be all over the place. We will shout from the housetops. God has come to us. Our salvation is here! So, arise and shine! The light and glory of God are upon us!

Prayer: Brilliant God, sometimes we wander around in deep, dull darkness. But Lord, we ask that we may be illuminated by your grace and love. We want to radiate and reflect the brilliance of your light. Shine through us, so that we may share you with others. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Sources:

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Epiphany Glory is Good for You

January 6, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (Isaiah 60:1). Arise. Shine. Light. Glory. Those are some important words. Let's look at the last two words first. We all want *light* in our lives, especially during these dark winter days. Six days ago, we had only 9 hours and 20 minutes of daylight. But now the days are getting slightly longer, and by the end of the month we'll have 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"* (v. 1). But just what exactly is glory? Do we want glory? Where can we find glory? Glory is majestic beauty and splendor, such as the glory of bright stars on a crystal-clear winter night. We give athletes and artists "the glory" for doing or creating amazing things. 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"* (Luke 2:9).

But the simplest and clearest definition of glory is offered by Christian writer Frederick Buechner: Glory is *God's style*. When the Bible says that *"the heavens are telling the glory of God"* (Psalm 19:1), it means that the heavens are revealing God's style: sunsets, starry nights, snowstorms, rainforests, mosquitos, garter snakes, loons, the human face. All, says Buechner, are "unmistakably the work of a single hand," showing us God's style.

On the Day of Epiphany, God revealed God's style to the world when the wise men visited the 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"* (Matthew 2:11). They gave God 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. Jesus grew to show God's style in everything he said and did.

Epiphany is all about the glory of God being revealed to the world, and the effect of that glory on us is significant. Light, beauty, splendor, and style don't mean much unless they have a positive effect.