

“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

2 See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.

3 Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 “Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.

5 Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.

6 Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

Cultured

I don't know if you can tell but I like gardening. I'd like to describe my garden as cultured. It may not appear cultured or refined as far as the eye can see. But it is cultured according to the original definition of culture. It isn't known as one of human intellect or achievement, it's not even refined or even cultured as we have come to use the word but it is cultured because I go out and tell the field, the garden, what I want it to produce. I then cultivate it with a wide variety of plants to produce: a cultured garden.

When you think of the Middle East maybe you're thinking monoculture or maybe even a land that is desolate, dry, and barren. The Promised Land wasn't always that way. At one point there were trees and plants and a promise to look forward to. It was a garden flowing with milk and honey. But instead of being cultivated it's was exploited, the trees were cut to make railroad ties, the Mediterranean turned brown from all the top soil that washed off.

Even when Isaiah wrote these words, the Promised Land was neglected and its inhabitants carried off to another culture. Isaiah writes to the land in danger of losing her people and even the promise, *“Your light is coming. His glory will be seen upon you. Nations will come to you. Your sons will return, your daughters will be nursed on the hip, the sea, the wealth of the nations will return.”*

That’s some promise but I wonder if Israel asked, “What about us?” That sounds nice but that doesn’t hold out a whole lot of hope for those heading toward culture shock. The promise applies even as we read Isaiah 2700 years after the fact but we might be thinking, “Good for them but what about us? That’s not our culture, our land, or us being carried off.” We may see no point to holding onto such a promise when our life here is cultured, growing, and expanding. But life isn’t always like that. Sometimes trees die, gardens are cut back, and it may feel like you are being carted off away from home. No matter what your background there is good news this Epiphany, this Gentile Christmas, as we find among Israel an all inclusive promise for all cultures.

It seems as if at Christmas Jesus has just come and now at the beginning of Epiphany Israel is already leaving. They are off to another much bigger garden. Babylon seems to be an unstoppable world power. Even their gardens were cultured. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon ranked among the seven wonders of the world. The Babylonian culture cultivated art, architecture, astronomy, medicine. It was a land so much greater and more powerful than the Land of Promise. If anything the captives carted off to this place may have been tempted to leave behind the Lord and follow after one of the many gods of Babylon.

Because their land, their garden, has been devastated. The desert that took over a once Promised Land was the work of people, not God. They are receiving the results of living in darkness. It’s because they thought that they could hide their sin. There in the shadows they cultivated a garden to their hearts delight. They tried to have the blessings of God without God and now they are receiving the consequences of their actions.

Now Isaiah comes along and makes promises that sound good but it is directed at the land. Isaiah is speaking to Zion. It’s common to refer to a city as a woman. Here she is described as a bereaved woman without any hope of seeing children again. But there is good news. News that this land can stand up to and rejoice in because one day they’ll be back. But for now this land is no longer Israel’s. Darkness covers the earth and deep darkness the people. The Lord hides his face from the people he cultivated, the people who turned away from him.

We have been cultivated in a garden, this plot of land we call our own. Unlike Israel we are not being taken to another land more cultured than our own. We live in what many

considered a melting pot of cultures. We have a culture entirely our own. But in such a cultured world it's easy for us to see the life of others and like Israel be tempted to follow after one of the many gods of those around us.

Often the church doesn't look like much. We have issues. We don't always agree on everything. Sometimes we're hard to get along with. Sometimes its cultural issues. Sometimes we resort to making laws and rule by force to get the results we want. We may even force our culture on others and its at these points when some may assume, "That's not for me. That's no my culture. Not my people."

Instead of being a bright light reflecting the truth of God's Word and his promises and how it has changed our lives - we often appear just as dark as the world around us. We are often caught in the same sins. We can become angry and frustrated, making short sighted solutions to problems which become greater problems in the future. We shouldn't be surprised Isaiah says, "*Darkness covers the earth, and deep darkness the peoples.*" You can't grow a garden in the dark. Often we have preferred darkness to light.

For that we should receive no comfort but only the consequences of our actions. The land and blessings we have should be taken away from us and given to others who will care for them. The pain and problems we've brought into this world aren't God's fault they are entirely our own. That's where God should have left us, a garden of our own choosing placed in the dark. But he came among us and he also revealed that to us through his prophet Isaiah.

Israel's outlook is poor. Sometime in the future they will return, but maybe not in their lifetime. Even before Israel is taken God responds with a Redeemer. He will come to Zion for those who repent. Life won't always be this way. Isaiah looks ahead to the return of the Lord, when his light falls on a land neglected, forsaken, and living in the darkness. A land described as a bereaved woman rejoicing and beaming with delight as her children return to her. Those scattered by captivity and slavery are brought home.

And not just her children but the wealth of the nations comes flooding in. For years Israel's wealth went out in tribute to the ruling nations like Babylon, Assyria, and Rome, but that will all change. There is a reversal as gifts are brought from afar, even the animals flock to the land. *Foreigners rebuild your walls*, Even nations who formerly despised Zion will be saved through her and find joy in service to the Lord. vs. 14 - *children of your oppressors will walk to you. Violence (Hamas) will never again be heard. Your sun will never set, and your moon will not wane, because the Lord will be your everlasting light, and the days of your mourning will be ended.* (Sounds like Revelation, the perfect garden)

That is good news for those walking away. Because this is not the salvation of a city but the salvation of the nations through this city. Through this city, through these people, through their descendants the Lord would come.

Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled when a star announced the Lord has come and the nations brought gifts in return to the land. Jesus brought light and life to a very dark world. Jesus came. Of himself he says, "*I am the light of the world,*" not, "I can show you the light," or, "I can show you where to find the light," but, "I am the light." He came into this dark world to drive out the darkness of despair and provide hope, healing, and peace. Rejoicing returned to the land. He reverses the curse of Babel. A new culture is created inclusive of all. He creates a cultured garden just like the first creating something from nothing.

Even for us, for us Gentiles who weren't even a part of God's people. Jesus forgives us and cultivates us in his garden. In baptism God *calls us out of darkness into his marvelous light* - (1 Peter 2:9). He waters us with his Word. He brings together every tribe, nation, and language to praise the one who breaks the darkness, creating a new culture not based in any one nation- so we don't have to learn Aramaic, or speak Elizabethan English. We come from many and varied backgrounds and we bring our gifts to God rejoicing in all that he has done for us. We rejoice right along with the Magi. We join them in worshipping Jesus with our time, talents, and even our offerings. We reflect the light that God has created in us.

Maybe Israel was thinking of the 9th plague. The plague of darkness at this moment. All of the land in Egypt so dark you could feel it but the little area that Israel occupied there was light. Maybe it was so Egypt could recognize that there is something different about Israel. They're God gives light and life. Not a select and favored status but a status that they can reflect to those around them. If we remain in the church and that light doesn't radiate out we may have one bright spot but that does no good in the garden in which we've grown. Instead you can point people to the all inclusive culture of Christ. You are his culture. You are his people. This is our God who came to this world, a very dark place, and for us and in our place. Rise, Shine, your light has come. The Lord's face still shines on you and you have something to smile about.

Even if you're landscape isn't cultured, the church is, even if ours isn't. One day we will gather with many from the east and west and sit at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven giving thanks to God for the light of his son that drives away darkness cultivates us into people of God.