

And His Glory Shall Be Seen upon Thee
Texts of the Messiah Christmas Section
December 16, 2018
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(Because the Proclamation of the Word included the Messiah Christmas portions, this homily is substantially briefer than is typical.)

They say that we have Coca-Cola to thank for our modern day understanding of Santa. One hundred years ago, they took the ancient figure of St. Nicholas and the Victorian version known as Father Christmas and from the two fashioned a figure with a red suit, white fur, white beard, and a big belly. Oh, the stories had always been there, but now everyone looked at them differently.

Such it is with the prophecies of First and Third Isaiah we've just heard sung — the Isaiah 9 passages we've just heard in that gorgeous declaration of our Advent theme, "For Unto Us a Child is Born," and the hopeful strains of Isaiah 60 just a few moments ago, "Arise, shine for your light is come...and the Glory of the Lord is risen upon thee."

Today, thanks as much to Mr. Handel and Mr. Jennens (the one who compiled the texts) as anyone else, we boldly proclaim these are prophecies of the Christ, the Messiah, the babe of Bethlehem whose arrival the choir will sing of in just few minutes. But that's not what they meant for those who first heard them. That's not even what they mean for our Jewish sisters and brothers today.

Isaiah 9 was a song of the baby King Hezekiah, the last great reformer of the southern kingdom of Judah — that last best hope of the people. This was a hope that would only be partially realized. And in Isaiah 60, written over two generations later — after Hezekiah's son destroyed all the good he had done; after Judah fell to Babylon; after the exile; after three generations of that exile; after the people had returned home to a newly rebuilt temple and squabbles over who is in and who is out — the prophet wants to remind them, even as coming hope hasn't been all they had hoped, that there was still hope.

But those hopes faded too because, just as Babylon had given way to Persia, Persia gave way to Rome and the children of Abraham, the great nieces and

nephews of Third Isaiah, were once again lost under the oppression of an occupying force and religious leaders who had capitulated with the occupier.

Then they heard the promises of Isaiah again but found in them yet new hope, yet new inspiration. Could Isaiah have been casting his vision beyond Hezekiah? Could the Spirit of God yet have good news in these songs of hope?

At the beginning and the end of the exilic period, and at the turn of the first millennium, the coming of light to dispel the shadows was a powerful metaphor, and one we are invited to cling to this season. It's Advent, so we do the play and pretend that Jesus hasn't already come, hasn't already lived and been murdered and risen. We pretend that this light that overcomes all shadows is, as yet, still on the horizon. And it's good that we do this because, in our reality, there are times when the shadows overwhelm — a seven-year-old refugee dies of dehydration in ICE custody; the political world domestically and internationally is in turmoil; hatred and prejudice like a virus we thought we were near eradicating soars back with double digit rises in every category of hate crimes in just the last 12 months — and the shadows encroach again.

And we need this reminder: "Arise, shine for your light is come." Rehearsing the wondrous stories of the incarnation, of the word made flesh, reminds us that Hope and Peace and Joy and yes, even though it's only the third week of Advent, Love, have been reborn in the new dawn of the Christ Child's impending (yet already completed) birth and ministry.

Let that inbreaking light feed us like light feeds the plants in springtime. Let the light of Hope give us courage, the light of Peace keep us grounded, the light of Joy send us out to share our hearts and hands with the vulnerable and the struggling, and the light of Love reveal, wither and overcome all that is false and selfish and hateful until all the world can sing again: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light." May that light be reflected in and through us, not just in Advent, not just in Christmas, but every day in every blessed hour. And his glory shall be seen upon thee. Amen.