

**The gifts of darkness and light
(Isaiah 60:1-6)**

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Nikos Kazantzakis was a Greek writer, journalist, politician, poet and philosopher. Among other things, he wrote Zorba the Greek, and The Last Temptation of Christ. He died the year I was born. The following words seem particularly relevant today, and I am moved by them. Picture these words:

I remember frequently sitting on the doorstep of our home, when the sun was blazing, the air on fire, grapes being trodden in a large house in the neighbourhood, the world fragrant with must.

Shutting my eyes contentedly I would hold out my palms and wait.

God always came, as long as I remained a child- [God] never deceived me, [God] always came, a child like myself, and deposited [God's] toys in my hands: sun, moon, wind.

"They're gifts " [God] said "they're gifts". Play with them. I have lots more.

I would open my eyes.

God would vanish, but [God's] toys would remain in my hands.

Perhaps it is something of this childlikeness that opens the door to God's presence?

Poetically, I reflect on Epiphany.

Revelation.

The scales fall off.

I see in a different way.

It's not what I expected at all.

Searching and not finding, yet changed in the searching.

A light shines in the darkness,

so it is no longer dark.

The darkness holds the light,

cradles the light.

The winter journey of the bulb is hidden in Earth, dark,

cold enough for it to germinate

and move towards the surface.

In summer, we seek shade from the burning sun

It is too hot, too searing.

I need the light and I need the shadow, Summer and Winter,

day and night, light and dark.

Sometimes the light reveals too much
I'm not ready for this much disclosure.

A babe, a germ of an idea -
Love incarnate,
Transcending,
overcoming my reticence.

They looked, they saw, they followed, these foreigners from an obscure sect.
They left symbolic gifts we hear, gold, frankincense, myrrh.

We look, we see
The bush is burning, but not consumed.
We are standing on Holy Ground, surely, the gateway to Heaven.
I recall epiphanies I have experienced,
times of knowing differently:

At MutiJulu water flows down from Uluru and pools at the base, water in the desert.

A man, I thought stupid, surprises me with wisdom.
I am wrong. I am limited.
I am changed.

In the Eucharist, bread and wine stills me,
opens me, blesses me, reveals a different love,
in my body.

Walking the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, for the first time,
AIDS Chapel nearby, images on the wall, and organ playing, a huge font.
I weep.
I am transformed.

Meditation is a labour of love, turning up
full, and emptying,
settling.
Enfolded.
The darkness within holds light, glory, even.

What is it with kings, wise ones and camels, who see,
outsiders who know what we fail to recognise.
I wonder who sees today?
Who discloses?
And, who and what, do I miss?
Am I blind to the bleeding obvious?
'Open my eyes, Lord, let me see Jesus.'

The Epiphany story from Matthew's gospel tells of seekers from a far land following a star from its rising until they come to the place of the child, arriving after consulting Herod and his advisors. They come bearing gifts. They bow to the child and honour him, and sneak home without telling Herod. The story carries with it foreigners, mystery, politics, intrigue, and genocide. It's all there, emerging, while at the same time the powerful Herod tries to squash the revelation.

Darkness and light live alongside each other. Power is always a dangerous thing which can be used for good, to inspire and lift up or to crush.

The Message for me in the story of Epiphany is about the seeking, about the 'beholding' that Sarah mentioned before Christmas, 'seeing at a different level; .. entering into a new state of awareness, opening to presence,' as Sarah said¹. It is about intentionally following my heart, and offering my gifts at the vulnerable and life changing place where the shadow and the light touch. These foreigners use their own techniques and methods to find what they are looking for, and then return home. And power surges around them.

The Isaiah 60 reading set for today is attractive at first, speaking of light and change. Those who were dispersed, come home and foreigners visit and pay tribute. There is hope and there is glory and there's also a tinge of menace, if you don't do as I say, you are dead we hear later in the chapter. We live in that world of corrupt power, of destruction rather than building, hurting rather than healing, yet alongside that, alongside war and living a false truth, there is Grace, there is hope, there is Community. I've never experienced displacement, or lack of food and shelter. What I see on the news is shocking and I don't know what to do, how to make a difference. I feel helpless. Christine Valters Paintner says that Hospitality is important. She writes:

To meet the wounded strangers within ourselves with love and compassion and to bring that profound care to others we meet is a powerful way of showing up in the world. Hospitality means making room for the lament, the weeping, the terrible grief at witnessing so much violence and loss of life.

We can meditate and show hospitality, we can then listen for what is ours to do. I can only pray, meditate, donate money, write letters, and care for those close at hand, and meditate again. Where do we go from here?

In Isaiah 60 we read:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

The language is in the feminine, and it is only after reading on a bit that we find out it refers to Jerusalem. Michael Chan reflects:

Isaiah 60 casts a magnificent vision of Zion's future — full of light, prosperity, and prestige.

¹ <https://benedictus.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/On-Earth-Peace-231223.pdf>

This city, whose history is riddled with the wreckage of war and marked by the scars of empire, will exchange the sounds of violence and ruin for the clamour of reconstruction and international traffic.²

He continues:

“Reversal.” This is the word that best describes the hope expressed in Isaiah 60. Through the power of God, the oppressed are put into power; those once stripped of resources and goods not only receive what was taken from them, they become exceedingly wealthy in the process; those driven far from Jerusalem return. The world, the text claims, is about to be turned on its head.

We read this text at Epiphany because of this great reversal and the hope it offers to the marginalised. We read this text because of the focus, light and darkness. Vulnerability reigns, and the wise and powerful serve, bringing prophetic gifts, before returning home by another way. The temptation of power though, is to crush opposition, to play out revenge fantasies, and this text buys into that too, as we see with Herod in the Matthean story of Epiphany, but the power we see in Cross and Cradle imagines a different future. This is where divine power manifests itself in weakness and suffering, and standing with the outsider, and the invitation is to also sit with this vulnerability, to turn to that light.

Light and Darkness seem apt metaphors to explore the meaning of Epiphany.

What does it mean to walk in the light in the ordinariness of each day, in the midst of darkness and light?

I still, I focus
and God appears in the dark,
in the unexpected,
a warm cup of chamomile, a smile,
a purple flower in the bush, kangaroos with their joeys,
butterflies, always butterflies.

How does the light come?

Jan Richardson says:

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.
What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.
That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.
That it loves
searching out
what is hidden
what is lost
what is forgotten

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-isaiah-601-6-3>

or in peril
or in pain.
That it has a fondness
for the body
for finding its way
toward flesh
for tracing the edges
of form
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.
I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.
That it will.
That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.
And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward [the light].
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still
to the blessed light
that comes.³

And Mary Oliver extends this with an invitation from the trees:
“and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine.”⁴

³ <https://www.mindfulnessassociation.net/words-of-wonder/how-the-light-comes-jan-richardson/>

⁴ Devotions :the selected poems of Mary Oliver by Oliver, Mary,1935-2019. author. New York :Penguin Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC,2017.©2017

