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Arise and Shine!

Rev. Dr. Binsar Jonathan Pakpahan

Scripture

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
2 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.
3 Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
4 Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you. (Isaiah 60:1-5)

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Introduction

For most Asian countries with wet and dry seasons, the sun rises and sets at a particular time. This is not the case for people in a four-season climate.

Barrow, the city in North Slope Borough in northern Alaska, is one of the coldest places in the world, with an average temperature of -12.5°C. Its population of around 4,212 experiences a temperature above freezing point in April, May, June, and part of July. Snow comes in October and melts in April of the following year. The last sunset is on November 18 while the next sunrise is on January 24. This means the people of Barrow will have 65 “sunless” days with only 3 hours of twilight during the day. Some people leave Barrow during those days for fear of winter depression. The whole town will come out to celebrate the first glimpse of sunrise on January 24. So the people of Barrow will personally understand this text, which is usually read during epiphany time in January, “Arise and shine!”

For Batak people, “arise and shine” also has great significance. The Batak word for sunrise is binsar. In Batak tradition, binsar depicts hope and light in the darkness. Many Batak traditional sayings use the word “binsar” as sunrise or light, such as:

“Adong na tuat sian dolok; Adong na nangkok sian toruam; Adong na ro sian habinsaran; Adong na sian hasundutan; Manumpak ma Debata; Dilehon di hamu pasupasuan.”

“Sahat solu, sahat di parbinsar ni ari; Leleng ma hamu mangolu jala di iring-iring Tuhan ganup ari; Mangula ma pangula, dipasae duhut-duhut.”

In these two sayings, binsar is connected with God’s blessings. The rising of the sun is often used in proverbs to explain God’s blessings. Children are believed to be God’s blessings, their presence seen

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2 Literal translation: Some come from the mountain, some come from the downstream; some come from east (habinsaran), and some come from the west; May God bless you and keep you.

3 Literal translation: when the boat comes until the sun rises (binsar), may you live long in God’s everyday blessings; and let all workers do their work well.
As new hope and light. While binsar is understood as blessing to a family or group, it is also expected to bring light to others.

Context of the Scripture

Our context influences how we read and understand the text. So when reading Isaiah 56-66, we need to differentiate the readers on three levels: (a) the immediate reader/listener, (b) the reader in Jesus’ time, and (c) we, the distant/future reader. For the first type of reader, i.e. the people of Israel who just returned from their exile, this text functioned as an assurance of God’s help. There is a shift in focus – from Babylon in Isaiah 40-55 to Jerusalem (56-66). Special attention was given to the issue of justice, the temple of God, offerings, and prayers. For the second type of reader, i.e. those in Jesus’ time, this text was a message of the coming of the Messiah. Some readers understand it as the coming of the wise men to see baby Jesus. For us, the distant reader, this text is often seen as a promise of God’s light in bringing justice and peace to the world.

Isaiah 60 pictures the audience as a woman since most of the Hebrew verbs are in feminine form. Isaiah 51:17-52:2 depicts Jerusalem as a woman. Since the people of Israel were returning from exile (from the darkness), the message was to encourage Israel to restore and rebuild the temple (to the light). The words “arise” (qû-mî) and “shine” (ô-w-rî) are to highlight the coming of the light of God (Isa. 40:10). In chapter 59, God’s presence is symbolized as light (compare Isa. 9:1 where light will come from the descendant of King David). Verses 19-20 give a clear example that the light does not come from the sun or the moon; rather, God is the source of everlasting light.

Isaiah often pictures the promise of salvation to the people of Israel with the words “arise and shine.” Isaiah 40:10 describes the coming deliverance of God’s people and the restoration of the land as God’s light. The coming of light is also used as a symbol of God’s pres-

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4 “Binsar ma mata ni arî, poltak ma matani bulu; Tubu ma boru na maio mancari jala boi pangalu aluan.” Literal translation: The sun rises (binsar), the moon shines, may a baby girl be given to you; that will be able to find good job and will be a place of comfort. “Binsar matani arî, poltak matani bulu; Horas ma anak lahi lahi, songoni anak parompuan.” Literal translation: The sun rises (binsar), the moon shines; may the son be well, as does the daughter.
ence in chapter 59 (vv 19-20). The contrast between light and darkness is used to portray the importance of light, especially to a people who feel they are in darkness. God’s light is bright, very bright, that the nations will come to it. This verse (3) can be seen as a hope of showing and bringing God’s light to the nations, who are waiting for justice, peace, and deliverance from oppression (Isa 49:6; 58:6-12). When God’s people are touched by the light (which derives from the same Hebrew word “shine”), they also shine the light to others.

Explanation of the Text

Isaiah wants to picture the coming of the light. The present perfect tense “has come” (v. 1) means God’s light is already here. Thus, the people of Israel are asked to rise and shine for the light is meant to be shared. One commentary mentioned that the first verse is a reminder of Israel’s first deliverance from Egypt.

The return to the future tense in v. 2, i.e. “will arise” and “will appear,” seems to show that after the first deliverance, God’s people returned to the state of darkness. The darkness could be their confusion at being back in their land with no idea of what to do there. But the promise of God’s light would give them new light to shine to other nations.

In verse 3, the new light would be so bright to be visible and attractive to the people. The metaphor of “kings to the brightness of your dawn” has been connected to the coming of wise men to see Jesus. When the light shines brightly, everyone will be able to see it. The term “your light” shows that Israel or God’s people will shine light that attracts other kings to come. God’s light comes, and now the people are reflecting that light to other nations. For the people of Israel at Isaiah’s time, this message would have been seen as an assurance that Jerusalem would be back on her feet and will arise from her rubbles.

In verses 4-5, Isaiah shows that the glory of the rising sun will invite people to come and fear the name of the Lord (see Isa. 59:19). Jerusalem is asked to stop her grieving and see the many who would
come or return to her, i.e. the people in diaspora (compare Isa. 49:17-18). Barnes' commentaries mentioned that the coming of "the daughters that are carried on their nurses' arm" means "to stay, to sustain, support; to bear or carry a child" (Numbers 11:12), hence, "to be faithful, firm." It is not certain that it is used in the sense of nursing; but it more probably means here, they shall be borne." For the readers in Jesus time, this text seems to refer to the apostles and disciples who would spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. It is also seen as the embrace of the gospel by the nations.

The Text in Our Context

First, what does "the light that shines so brightly defeats the darkness" mean for us today? While reading the theological challenges and political-economic situation in Asia, I thought there are a few differences between the problems of the 1970s and 2015. The escalating conflicts, threatened peace and human securities, problems in the areas of social justice and welfare are still there. Our challenges have increased with environmental issues, bioethical questions, global warming, and the value of life. However, I would argue that the world is heading towards a better place, when compared to the situation in 1957 when churches in Asia gathered in Parapat and started our ecumenical movement. Nowadays, Asia is one of the leading regions in economic growth, where democracy has largely been adopted in different styles and contexts, and where advanced communication technology has excelled.

Second, what does "when the Light comes to the people, the people will also radiate that light to others" mean for us today? Using the metaphor of Isaiah, we can say that God has come and brought the light to God's people. Hence, we, as churches in Asia, are called to be messengers of this good news in the midst of the challenging and depressing realities of today. Our light should radiate towards others. The household of God in the Assembly theme is a reminder for us to move beyond the boundaries of the church. Isaiah reminds us that the light reaches everyone and will be seen by people who are in the darkness. God's love moves beyond our boundaries, especially
when we radiate that light towards others. The household of God is large enough and God’s light is bright enough to reach all creation. As Psalm 145:9 puts it: “The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.”

Third, what does “nations will come and seek for the light” mean for us today? The wise men from the east travelled a great distance to come towards the light (Mt. 2:11). It seems that people are willing to travel the distance, across uncertain terrain, to find the light that promises certainty and hope. The wise men from the east represented the traveler, people from the distance who also saw the light. So the light also shines for other people outside of Israel, and those who believe will walk towards it. Another group of people who came to meet the baby Jesus were the shepherds (Lk. 2:16). They represented the people from the neighborhood, the people who worked at night, the outcast. So the light of Christ shines across boundaries, and invites all people to travel the distance to meet with the light.

While the light knows no boundaries, it is often the people who set the limitations. Barrack Obama once said that “Sunday morning is the most segregated hour.” Churches have grown immensely in Asia in the last three decades but such a church growth portrays how segregated we are as Christians. Indeed, many of us have participated in erecting higher and stronger walls which segregate and hinder people from genuinely communicating with each other across boundaries of class, caste, creed. Indeed, fault-lines that demarcate minority groups based on religious, linguistic and ethnic differences habitually divide and fragment humanity. It is time to move beyond these boundaries, seen and unseen, real and imagined. Our calling is to connect, include, and embrace all God’s creation, in love, compassion and the joy of fellowship. When the church shines God’s light towards others, people who have been searching for the light will come. We do not necessarily interpret the coming of nations towards the light as conversion to Christianity, but rather as sharing the light towards God’s creation and reaching out to those who are still searching. After all, we are living together in the household of God.
Questions for Reflection

1. What words do you use for sunrise in your language? Share a story about the importance of the morning light (sunrise) in your context.

2. The text talks about the light that shines so brightly that it defeats the darkness. What are some situations of darkness in our own context and how can we "arise and shine"?

3. The text talks that when the Light comes to the people, the people will also radiate that light to others. What hindrances block God's light to shine from our church and our lives towards others?

4. The text talks about nations that will come and seek for the light. How can we share God's light to others without building boundaries?