

Sermon Title: "Arise! Shine!"

Text: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12

Preached At: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On Sep 4, 1998, Sergey Brin and Larry Page first registered the privately held company they had founded as students at Stanford University. Google was born.

The company's mission statement from the outset was "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."

Mission accomplished. Many of us in 2012, only fourteen years later, cannot imagine a day without Google.

On June 15, 2006, "google" was added to the Oxford English Dictionary to reflect how prominent this search engine has become in daily life. We use it for everything from finding addresses, to restaurants, to movie times, to medical advice, to academic "research," to sermon preparation (☺), to locating any and all information that we need.

According to one source, "Google has been estimated to run over one million servers in data centers around the world, and process over one billion search requests and about twenty-four petabytes [a petabyte is one quadrillion bytes] of user-generated data every day."¹

Google is huge. And now, Google is narrating our lives for us. Here is the year 2012 through the lens of Google.

[Google video clip (2:46)]

The year that was, brought to you by Google.

I have to confess, I'm a bit of a sucker for these kinds of vignettes. Put a bunch of inspirational images together with some music, and I'm yours ☺.

I like this video. And I like Google. I use it every day.

But the more I've thought about this video, the more I've had some questions.

What does this video say about us? About our relationship with the tools we have created?

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google>

The video makes us feel important, it inspires us. It makes us feel like we are a part of something that is big and significant—as if pointing and clicking in a search engine is a heroic task in a story of cosmic significance.

The video urges us *trust* as well. Google is good and virtuous. Google helps out during natural disaster; Google empowers people to make a difference through sharing information. Google keeps us entertained and informed. Google is looking out for us.

Indeed, many people have come to the conclusion that Google is quite a bit more useful and relevant than God (I came across numerous websites this week that were quite eager to catalogue the ways in which this is true!).

Come to think of it, Google is, in many ways, exactly what many people think of when they think of God—a big, invisible answer box in the sky, ready to respond at the drop of a hat, to our needs and questions, from the ridiculously trivial to the age old questions that have haunted human beings throughout history.

Google certainly seems, like God, to be all-knowing. And Google doesn't really demand anything of you morally.

Google would like it if you were nice, but it doesn't ask you to love your neighbour or serve the poor or work on your character or cultivate the fruit of the spirit or anything like that. It doesn't tell you that you need to ask for forgiveness.

Google is there for *you*. *Whenever* you need it. *However* you need it. Help is just a click away.

God on the other hand? Well, God is a bit more complicated.

God doesn't always respond as quickly as we would like or in the manner that we would prefer. God is a bit mysterious. God doesn't spit out facts or opinions (or opinions masquerading as facts!) on demand or nicely arrange them according to popularity or relevance.

God makes us wait. God makes us pursue him. God seeks love and devotion and worship that are freely chosen and offered.

God authors a *story* and then enters the story himself.

God *reveals* Godself.

Today is Epiphany Sunday, a day in which the church has historically commemorated the presentation of Jesus to the Magi (in the Western tradition) and the baptism of Jesus (in the East).

When we hear the word “epiphany,” we tend to think of a “moment of sudden revelation.” I think of a flash of insight that all of a sudden “comes to me,” whether this is a good idea, or a piece of information that I had forgotten, or whatever.

But in God’s story, “epiphany” refers to God’s **self**-disclosure. It is something that we are *shown*, rather than something that occurs to us in a moment of inspiration (or something located by a search engine!).

In God’s story, “epiphany” is a *relational* term.

God says, “I will show you more of my character and purposes *over time* and *in the context of relationship*.”

Our main text today is from Ephesians, but I want to briefly refer to a few of the other Lectionary readings today as a way into understanding the nature of God’s self-disclosure.

In Isaiah 60:1-3, we read:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you...
Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

It is a message to the people of Israel, those with whom God’s redemption project first began. It echoes a promise made way back in Genesis 12 – Abraham’s family would be blessed *and* God would bless all nations through them.

Isaiah gives a vision of *all nations* streaming to Israel. One day, he says, a light would come from Israel to which *all* would be drawn.

This week’s Gospel reading comes from Matthew 2, the famous passage of the visit of the Magi at Jesus’ birth. The wise men come from the east bearing gifts, seeking a king

What do they find? A baby, in a stable, with a teenage couple and some shepherds and animals?!

They are looking for the king of the Jews... but is this king *only* for the Jews?

The story moves on... And with Isaiah’s words about nations streaming to the light of Israel ringing in our ears, with Matthew’s image of the Magi giving gifts to the infant king still in our minds, we come to Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus.

We encounter a different kind of epiphany.

The God to whom gifts were given in that manger scene, has come to give gifts of his own—gifts of life, of hope, of forgiveness, of reconciliation, and of adoption and new life!

Paul talks about the “mystery of Christ.” What is this mystery? That God’s family is growing. That Gentiles—non-Jews—are now invited in as part of God’s family.

The mystery is that the story has taken a dramatic turn. Through Jesus of Nazareth, Abraham’s seed is finally ready to be a blessing to all nations in the way that God intended.

God is full of surprises. His epiphanies rarely proceed as expected. God surprises the world in a manger in Bethlehem. And God surprises the world again, says Paul, in welcoming in those who were formerly outsiders.

The language Paul uses is remarkable: this is the “plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Through the church, the wisdom of God is made known, here on earth, and in the unseen realm!

As far as epiphanies go, this isn’t exactly according to the script.

Our familiarity with the story must not blind us to its strangeness.

God could have done any number of other things to show us who God is and what God is doing. There was any number of other possible epiphanies.

God could have arrived with magisterial pomp and ceremony, a grand display of awe and authority announcing his arrival as the rightful king of all people. He could have taken up residence in the Temple and ruled by force.

God could have dispatched a kind of Bible 2.0, which updated and clarified what all of those laws and regulations and strange stories from the first version were actually all about.

God could have ignited a political revolution, he could and mobilized a grassroots campaign advocating for the overthrow of Rome.

God could have done any number of more impressive or powerful things.

But a baby? A cross? A church?

This is God's flash of self-disclosure?

It was. It is.

Here, at the outset of a new year, we could perhaps do with a reminder of the kind of God we serve.

God is not a search engine in the sky. He does not exist to serve us, to answer our every question, to respond to our every real or perceived need.

God is much more wild and complicated, much more unpredictable and life giving than Google.

God *acts*. God *shows himself* to us. God *surprises* and *unsettles* us. God forgives and reclaims us. God adopts us into his family, calls us children, sisters, brothers, dearly loved. God *graces* us with his very self.

And what about us? How are we to respond to this God and his epiphanies?

The first line of Isaiah 6 gives us a good place to start: "Arise! Shine! For your light has come!"

Arise, shine!

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Arise, shine! The mystery has finally been revealed! God's family is a large one where all are welcomed in! Insiders, outsiders, everyone!

Arise, shine! You, the church, are the wisdom of God. Show forth this God with great joy.

Our task is to arise and to shine. We are to do this with "freedom and confidence," Paul says (Eph 3:12). Why?

Because God's grace, not human initiative is primary.

The Epiphany of God is not a program or a new set of laws or a political agenda or a self-help manual or anything like that.

The Epiphany God gives is God's very self. It is a gift given by a relational being to other relational beings. This is something that Google can never give.

Google can hold up a mirror and show us ourselves. It can show us what we, as human beings, have produced, what has inspired us, what we have searched for. But Google cannot open up new possibilities. It cannot disclose itself to us. It cannot love or forgive or make peace. It cannot offer grace.

And the Epiphany is all about grace.

This is a good word to us at the outset of a new year, I think.

Perhaps we look ahead to 2013 and see little more than a massive "to do" list. Perhaps we have all kinds of resolutions. This will be the year we turn the corner. This will be the year when we will become the people we want to be!

We will have successes. But we will also fail. We will make mistakes. We will slip into old habits and patterns.

And behind all of striving, will be grace. Behind everything will be a God is bigger than our successes and our failures—a God who loves us no matter how much or how little we are able to accomplish.

Or perhaps we look ahead to the life of our church in the coming year and see big things on the horizon.

We have the BFC process where we are trying, as a local body as well as at the national level, to figure out how to live and interpret Scripture faithfully in a very complex time.

We have our church visioning process, which we will discuss during Sunday School next week, where we are trying to figure out what God might be asking of us here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

We have our AGM coming up—we have decisions to make around how to steward the resources God has given us most faithfully and intelligently.

Big decisions. Exciting decisions. Perhaps overwhelming and intimidating decisions.

It can be tempting to think that a lot depends on us. That we have to figure it out and get it right.

Whether on a personal level or on a church level or any other level, we could always use reminders of who God is and how God works.

God's character and God's plan have always been from first to last about grace.

Grace to his people Israel.

Grace in coming to be one of us at Christmas time.

Grace in welcoming all kinds of people into the family of God.

Grace, grace, grace.

God has promised, God has come, and God has opened the door.

This is a safe place for us to find refuge as a New Year approaches.

This is a place of deep joy and gratitude.

May we venture out into 2013 supremely confident in the character and purposes of God—far greater and surer and more trustworthy than our own.

May our church embody the character of this God's epiphany in how we love one another, in the way that we extend grace and hospitality to one another.

And may we, with great joy, testify to the grace and mercy of God in all that we say and all that we do.

Amen.