

## Super Epiphany

✧ **out from the pile of darkness (vv.5-7)**

✧ **into the dawn of prayer (vv.8-9a)**

In the Name of Jesus our shining Epiphany Light, dear fellow children of the light:

Do you realize some people don't know anything else about today but "Super Bowl Sunday"? Don't get me wrong. God "***richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.***" (1 Timothy 6:17 NIV84) But why "Bowl"? Chips anyone? Actually, the shape of college football fields has bleachers built up the hillsides like a "bowl." And "Super"? Remember old style "Super Balls" in the 1960's<sup>1</sup>, hard rubber wrapped on steel bearings. "Super Balls" bounced through too many windows and eyeglasses until they were banned. The hard plastic ones never were that great. Much like this day dims compared to **Super Epiphany**. High priced ads and halftime shows promise unfailing energy, but the lights always dim, one team always goes home a loser – even though they're the best players in the world. Whatever your choice of entertainment, blessings like these finally lose their luster while day shines as **Super Epiphany**.

✧ **out from the pile of darkness (vv.5-7)**

One of my biggest surprises playing football was how dark it was down there. If you got to run the ball, eventually you'd be buried under a pile of bodies – your team blocking, their team tackling – unless you're like Forrest Gump. Remember how he'd run past the end of the field, right out the stadium with everyone shouting, "Stop, Forrest, stop!" Most of us don't have his speed and stamina – physically or spiritually. This dark time of year brings on cabin fever even if you don't catch the flu. And sometimes the heart just hurts from depression, loneliness so you feel as if you're buried in **darkness**.

Church this time of year feels better. Preachers can tell inspiring stories to lift us up. But godly preachers like Isaiah had a strange way of doing it, commanded by God! Isaiah 58 begins the last Part III of Chapters 40-66. You can almost hear teams entering a stadium, cutting loose with the brass: "***Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet.***" Happy thoughts? Not yet! "***Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.***" Not a popular message today, and not in Isaiah's day (700 B.C.) either. He asked back in 53:1, "***Who has believed our message...?***"

I'm grateful God brought all of you to hear God's Word first today. Years ago a Campus Ministry collegiate said that we should still worship on Super Bowl Sunday "to put first things first," even with services Sunday afternoon. But even being here we're in danger of a **pile of darkness** like the Jews of Isaiah's day. Just before our text they demand God tell them, "***Why have we fasted, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?***" That's the arrogant heart of man thinking the holy God, our awesome Creator, somehow owes us better treatment for doing good. But the LORD's prophet Isaiah exposes their hypocrisy: "***Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.***" (58:1-4 NIV84)

Any football game or major conflict is fought first in the heart. "***Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.***" (1 Samuel 16:7 NIV84) His holiness is like gold; our best efforts to improve it are like spray paint on a necklace. "***All our righteous acts are like filthy rags***" (64:6) – that's on our best days. Our best liturgical efforts, even a bowed head and rough clothing with ashes,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super\\_Bowl](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Bowl)

nothing we do can impress God. He demands more than outward compliance. ***“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.”*** (Matthew 22:37-39) Jesus shatters all pride at the end of today’s Gospel: ***“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”***<sup>2</sup> Pharisees were the champions of church in their day. Like, “Score over the defensive, or you can’t go to heaven.” Really?

Jesus says our ***“righteousness”*** must literally ***“overflow that of the Pharisees....”*** They tried to fill their lives with a drop of good works here and there. But they dry up in life. God comes along and fills us completely by faith in Jesus who did nothing but good works. Then God keeps sending His Holy Spirit by Word and sacrament to overflow our hearts and lives. This is the overflow of a proper, God-pleasing ***fast***: ***“Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless and afflicted into a home? Yes, when you see a naked person, you cover him, and you do not hide yourself from your own flesh and blood.”*** (EHV) That’s good to remember in our struggle to do good. Paul admitted he failed too. (Romans 7) This pile of broken promises and missed opportunities – who can get it off us? Who can get us **out from the pile of darkness?** Where is the power to come...?

### ✧ into the dawn of prayer (vv.8-9a)

Look at the Messiah whom Isaiah foretold. He did ***“loosen the chains of wickedness, to tear apart the ropes of a yoke.”*** Jesus did ***“release the oppressed so they go free, and...tear every yoke to pieces.”*** These were not just physical, political releases, but the kind of chains that torture your soul, that drown you in guilt, that tear your neck like an iron yoke too heavy for an ox.

Recall how John described our Champion as ***“the Word”*** in John 1: ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not [literally] overcome it.”*** (John 1:1-5 NIV84) ***“The darkness”*** could not drag down ***“the Word”*** because Jesus kept close to His heavenly Father in prayer, sometimes all night long while everyone else slept. Jesus still prays (Romans 8) for us to come **out from the pile of darkness...into the dawn of prayer.**

My youngest sister just experienced similar grace from some unknown neighbors. They saw her vehicle flipped on an icy patch and her climbing out the moon roof. They came running. A few years ago her husband and I had to climb up and out the passenger side window of their old pickup. We were amazed how quickly a neighbor showed up with heavy duty duals and a logging chain to pull us upright. We did nothing to earn their help. Nor could we earn God’s favor when He’s justly angry at our sins.

But shining through the **darkness** of our rebellion is the LORD’s Christ. Jesus took the full force of God’s wrath on the cross, then rose from the dead to proclaim our debt fully paid. He sends His Holy Spirit as promised through Word and sacrament to turn the lights on in our hearts. He wants us to know that the mortgage on our mansion in heaven is already covered. Now we’re reflecting His light who is ***“the Light of the world”*** (John 8:12) as he says to us, ***“You are the light of the world.”*** (Matthew 5:14-16) Now we’re bursting with His light in humble, heartfelt **prayer** where by faith in Christ alone, ***“your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will spring up quickly. Your righteousness will go out ahead of you, and the glory of the LORD will follow you. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer. You will cry out, and he will say, ‘Here I am!’ ”*** Brilliant **dawn** with Christ before and aft!

Some guys don’t want to admit it, but their dreams of sports are a horror movie where your legs won’t run and you just can’t move. Here’s your **Super Epiphany**: Christ will ***go out ahead of you and follow*** behind ***you*** with everything right in His sight and all God’s **glory** that no Super Bowl can win. We’re way past half time. We don’t need more entertainers. Christ is all we need. ***“Here I am!”*** Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Evangelical Heritage Version® (EHV®) © 2017 The Wartburg Project. All rights reserved. [www.wartburgproject.org](http://www.wartburgproject.org)

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New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church

180 County Rd F - Shoreview, MN 55126