

Arise and Shine

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise and shine! I hear energy in those words. The kind of energy that makes you want to leap out of bed, rush to the windows, and pull back the curtains to let the fresh air and sunlight in. Although that is a bit of an effort in futility here in the dead of winter, I must admit. But, nonetheless, these are words that can energize.

These words, spoken by the prophet Isaiah, were to be a wake-up call to a people who might well have wanted to simply pull the covers back up over their heads. The Israelite nation was living in exile in Babylon and had been so for decades. This was a very dark time in the nation's history and here was Isaiah attempting to spread some sunshine in the midst of their misery.

The darkness of the Israelites' existence was, and is, not unique in the history of the world. At the time of Christ, the nation was occupied by the Roman Empire. Throughout the centuries people worldwide have experienced oppression and dislocation. Even today there is great oppression happening around the world. Sadly, even here in the US, divisiveness and distrust are creating an atmosphere of fear and oppression. While Isaiah's words were addressed to the Babylonian exiles, they are meant for all people in all times.

Isaiah had long brought messages of hope to the exiles. These words from Isaiah 9 are an echo of the words read today:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. Isa 9:2

Isaiah is not ignorant to the suffering of his people. He recognizes the darkness, the hopelessness that envelops the hearts of his people as expressed in Psalm 137:

¹ By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

² There on the poplars
we hung our harps,

³ for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

It is into that darkness that Isaiah brings a message of hope. That the darkness they are experiencing is not complete nor is it forever. He seeks to rip back the curtains to let the bright sunshine in!

This past Thursday was Epiphany, the day Jesus was revealed to the Gentiles with the arrival of the three kings. Epiphany is a somewhat funny sounding word with great import. An epiphany is that sudden realization, that "AHA" moment, that brings new light and understanding to a situation.

Richard Niebuhr likens an epiphany, or revelation, to a moment when we are reading a “difficult book, seeking to follow a complicated argument, [and] we come across a luminous sentence from which we can go forward and backward and so attain some understanding of the whole.” This is Epiphany. That moment when an important truth suddenly becomes clear, and we can reinterpret our past and imagine a new brighter future in light of it. At Epiphany, we come to one of those moments when an event, the first revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, gets our attention and changes everything. Now the past makes sense, and the future calls for a new direction. Epiphany points us to God’s universal love and sovereignty.

How fortunate are those who hear and heed the words of Isaiah. These are favored people for they “shall see and be radiant; (their) heart shall thrill and rejoice.” The idea of radiance calls to mind the face of Moses when he descended from the mountain. His face was so radiant that he had to wear a veil thereafter. Jesus at the Transformation was made radiant, as well. Both Moses and Jesus had seen things that no one else had ever seen. For those on whom the light of God has shone, they too can now see things that others are blind to. God’s people can see into a future where crooked paths will be made straight, where mountains and valleys will become level ground. All they need do is “lift up (their) eyes and look around.” Since they are able to live with

a vision of the coming new world with confidence, they will thrill and be radiant.

To the people living in the darkness of exile in Babylon, Isaiah does not make a suggestion, he makes a command to “Arise and Shine!” To those of us hearing those words today, the command remains to “Arise and Shine!” The light that has come into the world is not to be kept to ourselves. If the “Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn,” then the light must shine and shine brightly for all to see.

At Christmas the Light of the World arrived to live among us and bring light to our lives. On that first Christmas Eve, the night sky was illuminated with a heavenly light as the Good News was proclaimed to shepherds in the fields. At Epiphany, guided by that bright Natal star, wise men, Gentiles, from the east were introduced to that same divine Light.

Isaiah is pointing to the way in which God breaks into our worlds, both then and now. He calls us to lift up our eyes and look around to see the many miraculous ways He is active in our world. Although our Christmas decorations may have been taken down, the presence of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with Us, remains. He remains present and active in our lives and the lives of those around us. Now is not the time to pull the covers back up over our heads. We are to Arise and Shine!

So, what gets you up and running? The kids, the dog, the smell of coffee coming from the kitchen? Is it the first hints of sunrise sneaking around the edges of the curtains? Today we are invited, *no* commanded, to arise and look around us. What is God doing in our corner of the world? How are we bringing our light to shine in that work? How might our lives, our world, be different if we were to begin each day with an attitude of Arise and Shine? How will our radiance impact those around us? Will they, too, learn to thrill and radiate along with us?

The Magi followed a star to the baby Jesus. What will guide us in our travels through this life? Follow Isaiah's instruction to "look up". Look for that guiding star, whether it be in Scripture, in prayer, in conversation with trusted friends and family, but look and see where God is calling you to shine your light today.

You have heard it said that it is "Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." Let us go from here today prepared to let our lights shine to chase the darkness of this present time. The time is now to Arise and Shine! AMEN

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