

What Does It Mean to “Arise and Shine”?
Isaiah 60:1-6
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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What gives you hope? When things are going bad, how do you hold on to the belief that they will be good again? When life seems different than how you imagined it would be, how do you cling to the understanding that there is still possibility?

These questions were real for the people of Judah and Jerusalem. The great power of Babylon had conquered them, destroyed the temple, taken many into exile, left some behind to work the land. But even more than land and homes, temple and place, the hope of the people had been taken.

Of course, at this point in Isaiah’s text these events had occurred years, even generations earlier. And so many, both in exile and back at home, had settled into this new way of being, had continued to work and marry and have children. And yet, for the community there was always a longing - a longing for what had been...a longing for freedom...a longing to be again who they knew themselves to be.

Perhaps we know a little about what they felt. While our situation is different, still the last year has brought many changes about which we had no choice, changes we simply learned to live into, to endure...and sometimes, if we were fortunate, to embrace.

This last year has seen people losing homes and jobs, making moves they would have never anticipated pre-pandemic. This last year has left us, even those of us who are doing the best in a difficult situation, settling in and yet longing for so much that we miss and that we want to know again.

And just as the people to whom Isaiah spoke were seeing glimmers of hope, so are many of us at this time. For them those came because the great power of Babylon was no longer so great and the new power, that of Persia, had a leader who became the hope of the people. Yes, Cyrus of Persia, would be the one to not only encourage their return, but to bless it and to support it. He would be the one through whom they would come to hope, to envision a better future.

Similarly, many of us are feeling hopeful. Whether that hope comes in the simple act of changing the calendar and putting 2020 behind us...whether it comes in the reality of vaccines beginning to be distributed...whether it comes as we see other changes happening around us - whatever it is that is giving us hope, we, too are able to envision a better future.

And so maybe we hear these words differently this year. “Arise; shine. For your light has come...” (Isaiah 60:1, NRSV). See, light is a familiar image to us. After all, haven’t we been talking about “the light at the end of the tunnel”? And in this season haven’t

we been celebrating that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5, NRSV)?

Things have been difficult for us. *And* there is evidence that life will be better. Meanwhile, rather than just sitting and waiting for that to happen to us or for us, today as we hear these words and as we worship on the first Sunday of a new year, we are invited to live the better for which we hope. We are invited, not just to sit back and wait on God or scientists or others, but to arise, to shine and to reflect God in this world.

So, how do we do that?

Because, friends, while there is no magic to a new year, it *is* a time when we naturally look ahead and think of new possibilities. So, perhaps the first step is to make commitments to live in the ways of God’s heart in this coming year.

But, what does that mean? Who is God? What are the commitments of God’s heart?

Maybe we start with the story that we have been hearing during the Advent and Christmas season. See, so often we think of Jesus only in terms of what his existence means for us. Too often modern Christians have reduced Jesus’ life to be about him coming to save us from our sins.

But if we are paying attention we learn so much about God in the simple stories of Jesus’ birth. And in this, we learn about who we are called to be, because after all we are not only invited to wait on Jesus but to follow him, to live in his ways.

So we remember that Jesus didn’t show up in a fancy palace and wasn’t born to the rich and the famous. Rather, he was born to ordinary people, even in a situation which would have been considered scandalous. His life began in simplicity. And the stories we hear of his earliest visitors remind us that God not only welcomes the poor, the pushed aside, the foreigner, the outsider, but that God values them in such a way that they get a special invitation.

And in the stories we find in the gospels, we are both reminded of these values in ways that encourage us to share them, and we are also reminded that Jesus came to shake things up...to challenge the powers that be...to question the institutions that made the rich richer and the powerful gain more power...to turn systems on their heads so that those who have been left out have their day. We need only read again Mary’s song to see this is true.

And these truths appear not only in the stories of Jesus’ birth, but they are themes that run through all the stories of Jesus’ life. They are themes that existed in the Hebrew scriptures before him as well.

So, if we are to live in Jesus’ ways, what commitments are we called to make?

We are called to love with abandon and to love those who our world calls unloved.

We are called to welcome the guest, the foreigner, the looked over and the left out.

We are called to challenge the powers that be, to call out the systems that benefit one group by destroying another - and to do this even when we are the ones benefiting from those very systems.

We are called to listen to others and to trust their stories.

We are called to walk with others even when entering their experiences makes us uncomfortable.

We are called to give up what we value in order to help someone else.

We are called to be willing "to be broken open so the light can get free" (Gabriel Andreas, "December," *StoryPeople Calendar 2021*).

Friends, a new year is before us. And while there is much that is unknown...while we may enter it more hesitantly than years past...while we may be trying to decide whether to trust the hope we feel...we are called to share the light of God's love with this world. We are called to live in ways that work with God to bring about the best for this world. We are called to "arise, shine, and reflect the glory of the Lord" (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 949 OT).

Arise and shine...let God's light shine through you. May it be our commitment for each day, not only of this year, but of our entire lives. Amen.