

The Kin-dom: The Light Breaks In
Isaiah 60:1-6
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
January 6, 2019
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In the movie “Mary Poppins Returns” there is a scene where Mary Poppins and the children get lost in the evening fog on their way home. Enter Jack, the leerie – or lamplighter, who along with his band of leeries lights the way home for the children in a big dance number. The song that accompanies this event is titled, “Trip a Little Light Fantastic” and contains the following lyrics:

*Let's say you're lost in a park.
Sure, you can give in to the dark
Or you can trip a little light fantastic with me.
When you're alone in your room
Your choice is just embrace the gloom
Or you can trip a little light fantastic with me.
For if you hide under the covers
You might never see the day
But if a spark can start inside your heart
Then you can always find the way.
So when life is getting dreary
Just pretend that you're a leerie
As you trip a little light fantastic with me.*

We all know what it is to live in darkness, in despair, in the shadows where nothing seems quite fully revealed, but we also know the power of the light. In fact, the favorite moment

in our Christmas Eve worship illustrates this well as we stand around this very sanctuary and begin with one small light which gets passed again and again around the circle until each of us becomes a light in the darkness.

Today is the day the Church has called Epiphany. It is the day when we celebrate the manifestation of God to the whole world, and specifically within the Jesus story, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. In other words, it is the day and the season when we talk about the ways that our mysterious God keeps showing up and being made known in our midst. And just as we use the word “epiphany” to talk about those aha moments when something previously hidden becomes clear, the season of Epiphany is about seeing more clearly. It is about light being shed in such ways that clarity comes to be.

Now, the most common story we hear on Epiphany is the story of the magi visiting Jesus – the story that, as we talked about last week, expands the reach of the Jesus event to go beyond the Jewish people and to include the whole world, people of other nations and backgrounds, of other cultures and languages.

Today, however, instead of looking at that story, our scripture comes from the prophet Isaiah. And, as Colee pointed out, you might have noticed some connections to the story of the magi. After all, when Matthew recorded that story, he pulled in images from Isaiah and wanted people to understand the connection to Jewish history.

So, let’s look for a few minutes at what was going on in the text from Isaiah.

The book of Isaiah as we know it, is actually understood to be several writings from the same tradition put together. We know this because earlier chapters address the Jewish people before the Babylonian exile, but the later chapters speak of their return to Jerusalem, a return which happened under King Cyrus of Persia. It is largely understood that the book put together

the way we have it covers hundreds of years of history. And the part we read today comes from later in the book – as the people wait for and prepare to return.

And it's important that we pause and imagine what this time must have been like for the people. See, it is too easy if we allow ourselves to simply say, "Oh, good, they got to go home...everything must be happy now."

Because the reality is that while exile was certainly difficult. Going home wasn't actually easy. After all, they were returning to a place that just wasn't the same. The temple had been destroyed. Many of their homes destroyed. This wasn't just about returning years later to visit a place they had once lived and finding that new buildings had gone up and businesses had changed, but this was about returning to a place that had been destroyed, a place from which they had been torn without a choice, a place that bore the scars of that memory, a place that seemed like it would never be the same.

And, to make matters more difficult, they had also been in exile long enough that exile *was* home for some of them. There were people returning to Jerusalem who didn't remember Jerusalem, who had never lived there at all. There were people who had only lived in exile. There were people for whom exile felt, not like exile, but like home.

And then, as if that wasn't enough, there was the question of God. Where was God in the mix? Was exile a punishment that came from God? Was God with them when they were there or was God so deeply connected with the land of Israel that they had been outside of God's presence?

So how could they come home?

This occasion which should have been joy-filled didn't feel as they expected. After all, what happens when you get what you want but it isn't as good as you imagined? What happens

when you get what you want but you don't know what to do with it? What happens when you get what you asked for, but you don't exactly recognize it? How do you hold onto hope when you feel hopeless?

Even as the people of Israel were returning and rebuilding and rediscovering what it meant to live in their land, what it meant to live as a community who understood themselves to have a particular relationship with God, still they were struggling with so many questions. They were trying to find their way.

And it is to these people that the words we heard today came. They were words of hope and promise...words that told them that their fortunes had changed...words that also asked something of them.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”¹

The passage goes on with promises about how they will not only return but will be a light to all nations, a light to which nations are drawn. This passage declares a reversal in which those to whom the people of Israel bowed will now seek them out and bow down to them.

But before we get caught up in the idea of the people of God simply going from being the oppressed, the displaced, to being those who potentially oppress and displace others, let us remember what it is that the people are commanded to do. To arise...to shine...to look around and to see that the glory of God for them is not only for them but for all.

No wonder this passage is also read on Epiphany. For both in Isaiah's words and the words of Matthew who tells us of the visit from the magi, we see a light that draws people in. And so “Epiphany points us to God's universal love and universal sovereignty.”² Epiphany asks us to be open to expanding our view of who God is and who God cares for. Epiphany asks us to

¹ Isaiah 60:1, NRSV.

² Kendra G. Hotz, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*.

not only receive the gift of God's light for ourselves, but to share it and to understand the responsibility of being the light for others.

While it is easy for us to embrace the light, after all, which of us isn't more comfortable taking our dog for a walk at noon than at midnight; which of us doesn't walk to the car with more caution in the dark than we do in the light? But, in this passage we are reminded of the ways the light also challenges us, the ways the light invites us to be more.

Because remember, it is hard to hide in the light. The light not only asks, but really requires, honesty of us. The light reveals who we really are.

When Isaiah says to the people who are returning from exile, "Arise, shine..." he reminds them that this isn't just about what God is doing for them, but that they have a role to play. It is time for them to receive the light and to be shaped by it. It is time for them to stand up and to shine the light so that others might see. It is time for them to shine into the world in ways that draw people in.

Because, when the light breaks in, then we discover the truth.

When the light breaks in, then justice is done.

When the light breaks in, then power, and especially the misuse of power, is challenged.

When the light breaks in, then there is room for all.

And this is not only our invitation but our call, to arise and to shine...to be the light for all to see...to carry God's light into a world in need.

The song that I mentioned earlier, from "Mary Poppins Returns," goes on and says, "So when life is getting scary, be your own illuminary who can shine a light for all the world to see."

Sometimes our lives are scary. But we are invited to arise...to shine...to receive and to be changed by the light.

We are invited to remember that we are called to be vessels of God's light...to remember that when God's light breaks in, there is no darkness that can overwhelm it.

Arise! Shine! For your light has come.

Arise! Shine! For you are the light.

Amen.