

## Arise, Shine!; Epiphany

Isaiah 60

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Neal Plantinga, former president of Calvin Seminary...

once told the story of a farmer whose wife went into labor one dark night in the nineteenth century. As the doctor tended to the woman, he asked the husband to stand near the bedside with a lantern. Soon the woman delivered a healthy baby boy. But then the doctor called out, “Wait a moment—another one is coming,” and the woman then delivered a twin baby. That was surprising enough until the doctor called out that yet another was coming. Suddenly the farmer began to move out of the room. “Hey,” the doctor exclaimed, “come back here with that lantern!” “Oh no,” the man replied, “it’s the *light* that attracts ’em!”<sup>1</sup>



The light of God is an attracting light – it is a light that draws people... more people than we are expecting. The light of God has drawn you here and it shines on you and over you.

This is where Isaiah 60 begins—with the light of God. And then the text takes a swift and quick dip into the current reality of the Israelites because they were, after all, in the midst of exile. “See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.” As I was wondering what this darkness might have been like for the Israelites living in exile, my eye fell on the text of Isaiah 59 – one chapter earlier. Friends, it reads like a horror film and I thought,

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hoezee: [http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-c/?type=old\\_testament\\_lectionary](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-c/?type=old_testament_lectionary)

oh my... this. This is darkness. Can we go there together? The Lord says to the Israelites, through Isaiah:

...your iniquities have separated  
you from your God;  
your sins have hidden his face from you,  
so that he will not hear.  
<sup>3</sup> For your hands are stained with blood,  
your fingers with guilt.  
Your lips have spoken falsely,  
and your tongue mutters wicked things.

*First, Isaiah is pointing his finger at the people...*



*And then it sounds like Isaiah turns his face to the heavens, shakes his fist, and laments...*



<sup>4</sup> No one calls for justice;  
no one pleads a case with integrity.

*He's talking to God about what he sees in the people...*

They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies;  
they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.

<sup>5</sup>They hatch the eggs of vipers  
and spin a spider's web.  
Whoever eats their eggs will die,  
and when one is broken, an adder is hatched.  
<sup>6</sup>Their cobwebs are useless for clothing;  
they cannot cover themselves with what they make.

*This reminds me of the fig leaves that Adam and Eve used to try to cover themselves.*

Their deeds are evil deeds,  
and acts of violence are in their hands.  
<sup>7</sup>Their feet rush into sin;  
they are swift to shed innocent blood.  
They pursue evil schemes;  
acts of violence mark their ways.  
<sup>8</sup>The way of peace they do not know;  
there is no justice in their paths.  
They have turned them into crooked roads;  
no one who walks along them will know peace.

*God is a road-straightener. God makes the rough places plain and the crooked places straight. Isaiah says that his people are road-crookeders. By their evil schemes and their violence they make the plain places rough... they create hills and valleys where there had been level ground.*

*And now, Isaiah's voice identifies with the people... No longer is he pointing his finger at the people... no longer is he shaking his fist, calling out to God, talking about the people behind their backs, now, he is one of the people.*



<sup>9</sup>So justice is far from us,  
and righteousness does not reach us.  
We look for light, but all is darkness;  
for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.

*Here is the darkness that covers the earth... the thick darkness that is over the peoples...*

<sup>10</sup> Like the blind we grope along the wall,  
feeling our way like people without eyes.

At midday we stumble as if it were twilight;  
among the strong, we are like the dead.

<sup>11</sup> We all growl like bears;  
we moan mournfully like doves.

We look for justice, but find none;  
for deliverance, but it is far away.

<sup>12</sup> For our offenses are many in your sight,  
and our sins testify against us.

Our offenses are ever with us,  
and we acknowledge our iniquities:

<sup>13</sup> rebellion and treachery against the Lord,  
turning our backs on our God,  
inciting revolt and oppression,  
uttering lies our hearts have conceived.

<sup>14</sup> So justice is driven back,  
and righteousness stands at a distance;  
truth has stumbled in the streets,  
honesty cannot enter.

<sup>15</sup> Truth is nowhere to be found,  
and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.

When I thought about the darkness that covers our own earth... here and now, I certainly saw parallels between Israel in exile and the sin and brokenness that covers this earth like a blanket. False lips and wicked tongues (v. 3), letting injustice and dis-integrity slide by (v. 4), empty arguments and lies... reproduction and multiplication of trouble and evil (v. 4), violence (v. 6), dishonesty (v. 14) and untruth (v. 15).

I suppose, though, I was just as struck by the shift in Isaiah's voice, from a voice of a righteous prophet calling out sin to the people – pointing his finger, to a voice of lament to God – shaking his fist and talking *about* the Israelites behind their backs, to a voice of confession. This sin is *his* sin. Each of these voices of Isaiah has its place, but it is the voice of confession and ownership of our own sin that seems to be the most missing and the most needed in our world.

In this last couple of weeks, the world of social media bizzed and buzzed with reaction to the President of the United States comments about Haiti, about African countries as

countries from which he wished the US didn't receive as many immigrants. And I watched as certain flavours of my Facebook connections called him out on what he said. Pointed their fingers. And there is a place for this. Others shook their fists and lamented to God about the president and his supporters – talking about *them*. And then others lamented to God about the former candidate and what she said and her supporters, talking about *them*. And there is a place for this.

But then there were those who, in the spirit of Isaiah 59:9ff, looked inside and saw their own sin. A Facebook friend (Chris Vanderzee), on MLK Jr. Day wrote (and shared publicly):

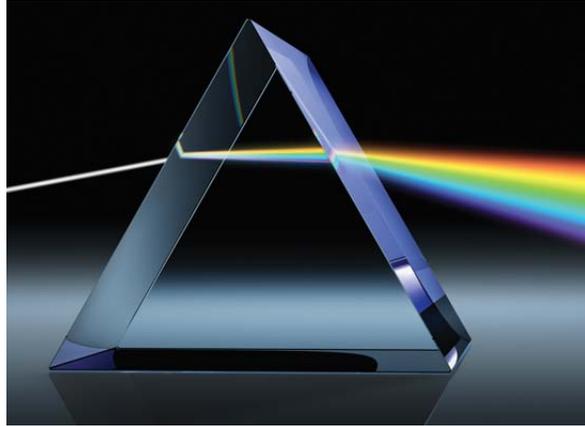
I confess today that I want a safe form of justice: a quasi-justice that doesn't require me to give up any power or personal advantage. I want to attend a nice MLK Jr. Day event and feel good about myself. I want to post an article about how others have forgotten how radical Dr. King actually was or how Christian he actually was. Meanwhile I will actively avoid Jesus' invitation to a sacrificial ministry of reconciliation. I want to be perceived as a good justice advocate more than I want to truly advocate for justice. Jesus, help me.

Into this present darkness, a light shines. Into *this* present darkness – not just that darkness long ago, not just that darkness over there across the border or across the aisle or across the ocean – into *this present darkness*, a light shines. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

Now, Isaiah 60 proper – the text that I set out to write a sermon on – is a rich text – so rich – that describes the end of all things... when God settles all the madness... it describes the heart of God for the shape of the world to come. There are about 5-6 sermons tucked into this passage – AT LEAST.

So, two things to say about this light that has come... this light that is rising upon you... this glory that appears over you. This light that shines into this present darkness.

First of all, and most importantly in this season of epiphany, this light is a light that includes the full spectrum of colour from every tongue and tribe and nation. As any elementary student of science knows, light drawn through a prism is FULL of colour.



And here in Isaiah 60 we see what is true throughout all of Scripture... that the love of God is for the WORLD. And his specific love for Israel, which translates into his specific love for the church through the New Testament, is a love that is meant to then be a vessel for his love for the world in all of its diversity.

How much we long for this diverse gathering of all peoples to the light of God translates into how we live in the here and now, anticipating and building toward the reconciliation and restoration between peoples that God's self-sacrificial love was given to inspire and activate and complete. And folks – this gets messy – and it gets public – and yes, it gets political.

It is sanctity of life Sunday. CRC churches are celebrating this to greater and lesser degrees. And our biblical understanding of the sanctity of life in our denomination is an honouring of the sacredness of life from the womb all the way to the tomb... honouring the sanctity of life in the womb, honouring the sanctity of life of the dying... AND honouring the sanctity of life all around the globe (no matter what your ethnicity, immigration or documentation status, sexual orientation or religion)... and not just *naming* the sanctity of life, and not just *praying* for the sanctity of life, but also *working* through all the means that we can... in all the ways that we can... through institutions like the government and through institutions like non-profit organizations... and alongside them... and sometimes in direct contrast to them... to work toward the most and best life for the most people.

The wideness of God's mercy and the depth of the fellowship and the gathering that we are working toward is mind-blowing. When Scripture talks about fellowship, it (as my friend Nathan Bierma writes, "does not talk about spouses and families – it talks about throngs and

nations. It talks about a kind of us-ness that we have never truly known, a kind of us-ness of which our current arrangements of intimate living and public gathering are poor imitations” (*Bringing Heaven Down to Earth*, p. 134). And Richard Mouw, who wrote a whole book on this chapter from Isaiah says, “Jesus died to save sinners-but he is also the Lamb who serves as the lamp in the transformed City.... Jesus is the one whose blood has purchased a multi-national community, composed of people from every tribe and tongue and nation. His redemptive ministry, as the ministry of the Lamb, is cosmic in scope” (*When the Kings Come Marching In*, p. 63).

So, this light is a light that includes the full spectrum of colour.

And secondly... this light is a light that transforms...



2 Peter chapter 3 talks about the end of time as a time of lot of light and a lot of heat: “The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.<sup>[2]</sup> ...That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. **13** But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwell” (v. 10, 12b-13). The light of the refiner’s fire will do the final work to make all things new... Bierma sums this up to say: “God will take the earth and the rest of the universe and will heat it up and wring it out and squeeze all the sin and death out of it, until only a spotless new creation remains” (*ibid.*, p. 45).

The rising light is a transforming light – at the end of time, yes... but in part now. When we admit that we are in need of transformation... when we bring our sin and sorrow into the light... that light of God is so intense, that it reaches into us and transforms us in such a way

that we are indwelt by that light. YOU are the light of the world, Jesus says... (Matthew 5:14). And when you let your light shine, “Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

The light of God transforms. Transformation is a work of God in us with which we participate. Transformation is miraculous, yes, but it is not magical. It is intentional on God’s part and it is intentional on our part. I ran across these questions below and I wonder if you might take them home and answer them for yourselves sometime this week, in the spirit not so much of a New Year’s Resolution, but intentional transformation – participating in the light of God...

#### QUESTIONS AS WE ENTER THIS YEAR...

1. What was one of the moments I was most proud of this year? What does that tell me about what I want to spend my energy/time/money on the next year?
2. Who really enriched my life this year in a big way? Who is someone I am wanting to get to know better in the year ahead?
3. It was a year of resistance for many people. What did I resist most effectively? What did I surrender to?
4. When did I get in my own way this year? Did I get in anybody else’s way? How will I step up or step back in 2018?
5. When was I most physically joyful in 2017? How can I get there more in 2018?
6. What makes me despair and what gives me hope right now?
7. Did I recognize God in anyone this year? Where will I look for God living, moving and breathing in the year to come?
8. If I imagine the coming year as a house, how might I ask God to bless it? And who will fill it? And will I welcome them in?

Inspired by Courtney E. Martin (Columnist, On Being) and adapted by Shawna Bowman of Friendship Presbyterian Church Chicago