

## **“Arise! Shine!”**

### **Sermon – January 5, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church**

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At a Nativity play, three 10-year old boys approach the manger as the Wise Men offering their gifts. The first one says, “I bring gold.” The second one says, “I bring myrrh.” The third little boy hesitated, clearly having trouble remembering his line, finally stammered, “Frank sent this!”

Today is the twelfth day of Christmas and so tomorrow is Epiphany where we commemorate the coming of the Wise Men or, more properly, the Magi from the east to visit Jesus.

Most Christmas pageants—and nativity scenes—lump the visit of the Magi from Matthew’s account with the birth story from Luke’s account, but since Herod orders all the children in and around Bethlehem two years old and under to be killed when the Magi don’t return to him, it seems the event took place much later than 13 days after Jesus’ birth.

Epiphany literally means “manifestation” and in Western Christianity, is the celebration of God’s self-revelation to the world in Jesus Christ. In Eastern Christianity holiday is associated with the baptism of Jesus, which we will celebrate next week.

For us we celebrate the revelation of God’s promise and purpose to the nations of the world, as the Magi came from the East to worship to the Christ child, and God’s covenant of grace is extended to all who believe the good news of Christ Jesus.

Today’s epistle lesson from Ephesians underscores that as verses 5 and 6 say, “it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

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This is indeed good news, since none of us here would be without that revelation made known to and promulgated by Paul. By uniting in the church people of different backgrounds who were previously hostile toward each other, God’s manifold wisdom is made known on a cosmic scale. The church, therefore, is to be a living witness to the power of the gospel to reconcile people both to God and each other. And yet that seems to be more of a dream than a reality. In life there are moments when it seems that we regress before there is any progress. Two steps forward, one step back.

Looking around today it is easy to be discouraged. Christians split politically and theologically. War and the threat of more war. Hate and fear driving societal actions. A planet in turmoil. Where is the light of the world?

We get some insight from today’s Old Testament lesson from the beginning of Isaiah chapter 60.

Most scholars divide the book of Isaiah into three parts written at different times from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE from the school of Isaiah.

Today’s passage falls into so-called Third Isaiah, that is, chapters 40-66. It is the time period after the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, freed by the Persians.

In Jerusalem, a major conflict had arisen between those who remained and those who returned. Living conditions were extremely difficult. Jerusalem was in ruins. The people were now divided again not against some outside threat or enemy but among themselves.

Chapters 58 and 59 are characterized by gloom, by despair, by a call to repentance. They are also marked by a yearning for light and glory to

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come, which comes in a thunderbolt in the opening line of chapter 60, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!”

This coming, this shining forth is unconditional. God is always a God whose glory offers salvation. The people’s repentance, the mending of ways, the living out of justice is a response to this coming! It is not an attempt to be made right with God but it is thanksgiving for the one who comes, who reveals life and salvation in the midst of the community.

Thus, these first six verses of Isaiah 60 are not a simplistic prediction of a new age but contains a call, an imperative, to be a part of the restoration of Zion.

Imagery provides the poetic force in this passage. In verses 2-3, the prophet describes the light of God in terms so vivid one can almost feel the warmth emanating from the page and uses the image of thick clouds and darkness to powerful effect in the description of the experience of the other nations: “For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

In verse 5 the imagery of light continues: “Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.”

The source of the brightness is not divine, but is the result of joyful reunions and a renewed prosperity—you shall radiate in response to

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God’s graciousness.

The vision of this passage and all of Third Isaiah is one of complete restoration. The tone is triumphant and tender!

And yet, we know from history that the people then did not see a dramatic reversal of fortune for Zion and indeed never did arise to be its own country again until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Biblical prophecy is not flat prediction, though, but rather is an invitation to change, to be empowered, and, sometimes, to repent. Within Zion’s call to witness in Isaiah 60:1-6 is also a call to the community to believe in the vision, to endure the present hardship, and, with God, to bring the vision into reality.

Thistle Farms in Nashville, TN offers women survivors of trafficking, prostitution, and addiction the time and space they need to heal.

They have a saying that Callie Plunket-Brewton, a campus minister at the University of North Alabama, thinks serves a similar function to the visions of the Zion poems in Third Isaiah. The saying is “Love heals.”

Becca Stevens, who founded the Thistle Farms community, stresses that “love heals” is not a happy ending but a vow. It’s a vow that they make to themselves and to one another. By the grace and glory of God, they work together to bring that vision to life, to make “love heals” a reality.

And that is the message for all of us. Yes, it is very troubling what is going on in our country and the world and to become despondent. But in reality, even before the time of Isaiah there has always been a struggle between mercy and judgment, between inclusiveness and exclusiveness.

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The history of the Christian church has been this way. Our origins are as a persecuted minority for 300 years that still managed to build the first hospitals, care for the needed, and be bound together by love.

After being adopted by our oppressor as the state religion we spread, though oftentimes converting by sword rather than by free will.

And yet, the message of Jesus still lived on through people like St. Francis of Assisi at the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century heard the voice of God and started an order to preach a message of love and humbly assist those in need.

And throughout history both compassion and intolerance, inclusion and oppression, all in the name of God.

So on this day that we celebrate the revelation of God’s son to world and for the world, we commanded to boldly spread that message, the message that God wants reconciliation of all people to him and to each other.

In response to God’s gift we are to be his light to world, knowing that light drives out darkness and gives hope to those in need. And despite the great rifts in our society and the world to remember that saying from Thistle Farms: love heals. Like them, let us make that our vow. And let us do so joyfully, not in a pollyannaish way, but in thanksgiving for the one who comes and is to come, with an invitation to change, to be empowered, to repent, to show the glory of God through his love.

Arise, shine! For your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.