

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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January 10, 2021
First Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise; Shine!

“For darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.”

Let me begin this morning with the context in which we find ourselves as people of God. Over 350,000 Americans have now died of Covid-19. The suffering rippling out from that bare statistic has touched us all. Our faith in government has been shaken, our trust in medicine’s ability to protect us is questioned by many, and the inequities of our society are exposed for all to see. And this week an angry mob of thousands stormed the U.S. Capitol to disrupt the workings of our democracy. They followed the divisive, inflammatory words of leaders corrupt with power. Five people died. Darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.

Yet here in Bozeman, Montana, the sun shines on a beautiful landscape covered with snow. People are still kind to one another, for the most part. On Wednesday, as the mayhem broke out in Washington, many of us were actively engaged in expanding peace and understanding in the world through our longstanding Interfaith Forum. Some people think those of different religions can’t talk to one another civilly. But we do it publicly every month, often addressing controversial topics. There is light in the world. As Isaiah says, “Lift up your eyes and look around,” and “Arise, shine, for your light has come.”

People of faith, we cannot ignore the darkness. Because we have God’s light to shine on the lies, corruption, and sadness of the world. More than ever, the world needs us to reflect God’s glory, which is the truth and love of Jesus Christ, into its darkness. More than ever, the world needs the Epiphany message that the glorious work of God is for all the nations, all the tribes, all the families of the earth. More than ever, we need peace, and we need hope, and we are called to be those who shine like stars in the world.

This is not a time for arguments. It is a time for poetry. The recently published anthology of Native Nations poetry edited by U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo has a poetic title which captures the same truth as Isaiah 60: *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through* (2020, W.W. Norton & Co, London). The light of the world is subdued right now, but the song of Isaiah comes through. It is a song of hope, voicing God’s promise of redemption.

And it was first sung in a time of deep darkness, after the exile in Babylon was ended and the task of rebuilding the nation seemed impossible. Buildings had crumbled, those in charge were corrupt and incompetent, and people were apathetic about their religious practice. Grief and desperation prevailed. Hope was hard to come by.

Yet Isaiah sings, Arise; Shine! He announces the presence of God’s light, and a future in which all will be drawn to that light as the light dwells in the people of God. Like kings bringing tribute to an emperor, they will honor the light with gifts. Instead of war horses trampling the ground, they will bring a multitude of camels, representing domesticity and prosperity. And then there are the sons and daughters who will return! The light of God will gather a great family reunion of all the children of God.

Like the New Testament’s proclamation of the kingdom of God, Isaiah’s vision of the glory of the Lord filling the earth is present and still coming, here and not yet complete, promised and still to be fulfilled at the end of time. So like the Judeans of the sixth century B.C.E. and like Christ’s listeners in the

first century C.E., today we dwell in an unfinished “meantime.” In this “meantime,” which right now seems especially “mean,” how can the vision inspire us? How are we to live as people of light?

Isaiah’s vision drew upon scripture written before his time, and it resonates in scripture written hundreds of years later. Genesis tells us that God’s first act in creation was the gift of light, overcoming the dark emptiness. Following their liberation from slavery in Egypt, the Hebrew people were guided by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light in the wilderness. In the late eighth century B.C.E., another Isaiah prophesied, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” (Is 9:2) And then the Gospel of John tells us of Christ, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (Jn 1:5)

With God, there is always light, and God’s people reflect that light. In a dark time, the prophet Daniel called the people to faithfulness, saying “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars, forever and ever.” (Daniel 12:3) So while John tells us that Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” he also said, “Whoever follows me will never (Mt 5:14) And the apostle Paul taught, “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.” (Eph 5:8-9)

My friends, the light is here for us. We need to look up and recognize it and live by it. For God’s promise will be realized through us, those who give our lives to God’s way of goodness, and righteousness, and truth.

The riot in our nation’s capital this week was the opposite of God’s way of goodness, righteousness, and truth. It revealed a sickness in our nation’s soul which will take the commitment of many and the grace of God to heal. There are no excuses which can explain away the actions of the mob or the rhetoric which fueled it. Words matter, because they are translated into actions. Inflammatory words activate parts of the brain which inhibit rational thinking and cause extreme reactions, including violence. (from “Proposed Carter Center Messaging for Faith Leaders Response to Storming of the Capitol,” January 6, 2021) We must be careful stewards of the words we use, humble before their power.

Which is why the simple exercise of “star gifts” can be transformative for us. You heard me explain to the children their “star gifts,” or “star words.” But I hope you will not relegate these stars, these words, to the children only. Star gifts are for people of all ages, and everyone on the church’s email list will receive one this afternoon. (And if you’re not on the email list, contact me by some other way and I will get you a star and a word!) I hereby invite you to follow the star of your word, the light that word shines on your life, this year. It is a gift to you, after all, not a chore. I advise against swapping it for a word that feels better at the moment. Use it for a year before you dare to re-gift it. So for example, if the star you are invited to follow this year is “self-control,” I hope you will not seek to exchange it for “freedom,” which may be someone else’s word. Stories are told of people who thought their word was a dumb one when they received it, but discovered its riches as their life unfolded that year. It’s not magic, but maybe it will be mystical for you.

And when the light of the world is subdued, may our songs of faith, hope, and love shine through. For that is where Epiphany leads, outward into the world of need. Outward, because goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, life is stronger than death, and light is stronger than darkness.

I said earlier that this is not a time for argument, but a time for poetry. So I close with a prayer offered in the shape of a poem, written by Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, who spent his life immersed in the poetry of Isaiah and the prose of the world.

On Epiphany day,
we are still the people walking.
We are still people in the dark,
and the darkness looms large around us,
beset as we are by fear,
 anxiety,
 brutality,
 violence,
 loss —
a dozen alienations that we cannot manage.

We are — we could be — people of your light.
So we pray for the light of your glorious presence
as we wait for your appearing;
we pray for the light of your wondrous grace
as we exhaust our coping capacity;
we pray for your gift of newness that
will override our weariness;
we pray that we may see and know and hear and trust
in your good rule.

That we may have energy, courage, and freedom to enact
your rule through the demands of this day.
We submit our day to you and to your rule, with deep joy and high hope.

(Written in 2008; <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/487-walter-brueggemann-epiphany>)

Lord, make us people of hope.