

## **Arise! Shine!**

### **Isaiah 60:1-6**

Good Morning Church Family! Good morning to you in this room and good morning to those of you who are able to join us on our livestream. I'm so glad you're here. It's the start of a new year in our church and in the community, and I'm excited to see what God will do this year, the ways that God will carry us this year.

Who, in this room, was at some point in their lives afraid of the dark? I know I certainly was, it seems most kids go through a stage where they feel afraid or nervous of sleeping in a dark room. I remember as a kid always saying to my mom after she would tuck me in, "Make sure you turn on the night light!" Both my kiddos have a nightlight in their rooms. With light, even just the soft glow that a nightlight emits, it's possible to see that scary blob on the floor is just a pile of clothes. The monster looming in the corner is a chair with some books stacked on the seat.

As we grow, most people stop being afraid of the literal dark and start being afraid of the metaphorical darkness -grief and loss, financial strain, shifting worldviews, the unknown, Others- that is people who seem so different from us, mental or physical illness. Most people never stop being afraid of the dark, but the definition of darkness changes. But really, the fear of the dark, whether it's a dark basement or a dark season boils down to the same thing - we can't see clearly, we don't know what is a threat and what isn't, we

don't know if we're going to get hurt as we stumble around, don't know how long the darkness will go on, we don't know how to turn the lights on, how to see things for what they really are. We're afraid of getting hurt, or worse, in the dark.

The people who received the prophecy in our scripture passage for this morning, knew a thing or two about darkness. Third Isaiah is situated in the sixth century BCE as the exiles from Babylonian returned to Jerusalem. 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.

When reading Isaiah 60 publicly, without also reading at least the preceding chapter, the radical irruption of light and glory, consolation and joy is missed. Chapters 58 and 59 are characterized by gloom, by despair, by a call to repentance (the ways of the wicked are crooked, our transgressions are many, our sins testify against us). They are also marked by a yearning for light and glory to come (we wait for the light but there is only darkness).

The opening line of Isaiah 60 is like a thunderbolt of glory. What surprises the reader or hearer is the abruptness of the shift from doom and gloom to light and glory. Perhaps what is most surprising in this shift is God's response to the people's crooked ways and their sense of despair: they are not to mend their ways first (out of fear) rather God comes, God irrupts, God arises and shines forth in glory!

The exiles are facing the darkness of the unknown. They're returning home from a land that foreign and oppressive and rather than being united, they're fighting, they're uncertain what to do, they can't see the way forward; they've lost their vision. I can certainly identify with that feeling, I suspect that many of you can as well.

Further, the problem of our darkness is more than just situational, as was the case for Exiles. Scripture speaks also about the collective darkness we face, and that sin blinds us, shrouds us in mystery , so that we cannot see God's best for us and for the world. Ephesians 5:8-14 says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." We need light so that we can see clearly.

But God, who is rich in mercy, says, "I can't stand this! Seeing my children stumble around, groping in darkness, unable to see things as they really are! They need light!" And the light comes to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus himself makes this statement in John 8:12, "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" Because

of Jesus we no longer are stumbling in the dark -we can now see things as they really are. Everything is bathed in the light of Christ.

This week, we were treated to the most incredible hoarfrost. I just couldn't believe how long it lasted and how it grew thicker everyday. All this very ordinary, sort of barren landscape that is winter in Saskatchewan seemed utterly transformed. I noticed so many little things -like has this tree in my yard always had this many branches!? And I think, wow! Everything feels new, and different. I notice things that I didn't before, even though nothing really has changed. And Jesus is like that, he takes our whole understanding of God, ourselves and the world and parks it right under a ray of light -Making all that is ordinary and commonplace new.

Of course, putting this new vision into practice, seeing everything under the light of Christ in our day-to-day lives is a whole other kettle of fish. I've worn glasses or contacts since grade 4, and everytime my prescription changes and I get a new pair, I put them on and think, "Ah- perfect! Things are definitely more sharp!" and then I spend the next week feeling off-kilter, blinking often, as I adjust to the new way of seeing things. In our journey with Christ, this process is lifelong. It's a process of seeing things (ourselves, God, others, the created world) in the light of Christ. It doesn't necessarily come naturally to us. Through prayer, studying of the scriptures, community, and practice we get better at it.

So, know that Light has come in Jesus Christ to our World, what do we do now? How can we live with our eyes wide open, how can we let this Light in?

First, we can allow the light of Jesus to change how we see God. My father grew up in the Catholic Church, and it was very difficult for him. Not because Catholicism is difficult, to be clear, but there were some difficult factors in his family, things that happened in their relationship to the church. He experienced the Priests as very aloof, starched collar, and not interested in who he was as a person. He stopped attending the parish as soon as he could. Fast forward to my Dad's 30s, and he was in the process of working through some things and doing some spiritual seeking. He landed at the Baptist church in my hometown, and started spending time with the pastor. A quiet, thoughtful man of similar age named Kim. The relationship grew into a lovely friendship, and my Dad would credit this relationship for bringing him into faith and really, changing his understanding of God. Kim's posture helped my Dad to see God in a new light, not as aloof or disinterested, but as one who cared about him, John, for who he was and all that he had experienced.

And that's what the Light of Jesus- does for us, it changes how we see God. Jesus has this conversation with the disciples in John 14: "Don't be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. You know the way to the place I'm going. Thomas asked, "Lord, we don't know where you

are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him." Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us." Jesus replied, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I have spoken to you I don't speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does his works. Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves." The light of Jesus illuminates the character of God.

Secondly, the light of Christ allows us to see one another more clearly. I read a few books over the holidays, but this one was particularly affecting. Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson is an African American Lawyer in Alabama and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative. The EJI offers free legal services to criminals who have been unfairly convicted of crimes they didn't commit or unjustly punished for crimes they did commit. The EJI often focuses on helping people from especially vulnerable groups- those on death row, juvenile offenders, those suffering from mental illness, those with physical disabilities, or who are themselves victims of abuse. Many of their clients are people of color.

In the book, Stevenson shares stories of some of the clients and more well known cases. I won't share too much, I don't want to spoil the book for those who want to read

it (There's also a movie based on the book, if that's more your style), but there was one short story in the book that was particularly moving to me.

Stevenson writes that he is on his way to a penitentiary to see a client; a man with mental illness connected to abuse in his early life and traumatic brain injury as an adult. This man was sentenced to death row-cruel and usual punishment based on the man's mental state. As he arrives at the prison, he notices a truck parked out front and it's covered in racist, angry confederate American bumper stickers and slogans. Once inside, he encounters an officer that he's never seen before, a white man, about Stevenson's age with a close buzzed haircut. The guard is unnecessarily rude and unfair to Stevenson, requiring a strip search (which was not the protocol for a legal visit) and to sign the registration book (also not protocol). Stevenson, understandably frustrated and angry at the guard's behavior, consents to his demands, knowing this is the only time he has free time to see his client. Once inside the visiting space, his client spends much of his time asking Stevenson if he'd brought him a chocolate milkshake. He apologizes to the man that he didn't bring the milkshake (not that he had known), but he would try in the future. They talk some about the case, and then Stevenson leaves. As he departs, the guard stops him at the door and says, "Just so you know, that truck out front is mine."

This routine, the rude, rough welcome from the guard, and the milkshake request from the client keeps up for months as Stevenson visits his client. Finally, the man gets his return date in court. Stevenson details the life of his client, full of abuse at home, abuse

within the foster system, and mental illness resulting from his lifelong trauma. (p 201-202)

Isn't that beautiful? I cried when I read it. That once this officer knew the prisoner's story, he was able to respond with love and compassion. Able to see the humanity in this person, this man whose job was to control him. What I think this story says to me as a follower of Jesus is that when I am able, by the grace of God, to see people in the light of Jesus, I can see that person with the eyes of Jesus, with the fullest understanding that Jesus has of another person. Jesus says, "I know the whole story. And I love them. I welcome them. I know your whole story and I love you and welcome you." I don't need to know the full story to extend love, mercy and welcome to another person, because God knows the whole story, and that is enough. Enough to welcome those who are vulnerable, like Avery, the man in prison whom we feel pity for. And those who wield power, like the officer, whom we feel angry towards.

So that is the challenge that the light of Jesus asks of us, but there's also a beautiful, hopeful command. What are we supposed to do in this world, now that it's bathed in light? The command is right there, in verse 1 of Isaiah 60, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you." We are commanded to stand up and refract that light all; like a prism hanging in a sunny window. This is our ministry, to live in the light and to allow the light of Christ to shine.



Philippians 2:12-16 says, "Therefore, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who is working for you both to will and to work according to his good purpose. Do everything without grumbling and arguing, so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation, **among whom you shine like stars in the world**, by holding firm to the word of life.

Brothers and Sisters, as we enter another year, with all its joys and challenges, hopes and fears, may we encourage one another to shine like stars in the world. Amen.