

Light in Winter
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
January 1, 2006
Text: Isaiah 60:1-6

*Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight.
I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.*

I don't know how the custom of wishing on a star developed, but maybe it's because since the very first, humans have used the night sky for navigation, to find their way. The wisemen read the stars which launched them on a journey toward wish fulfillment in ways they could not have expected. Almost every culture and every religion associates physical light with spiritual illumination, enlightenment. The Judeo-Christian tradition takes that notion a step further, attributing divine intent and connectivity to the giving of light.

This morning we are celebrating "epiphany," the giving of the light. If you're a math stickler, you'll know that "epiphany" is supposed to be "twelfth night"—or twelve days after Christmas-- and that it actually will occur on Friday. Still, poised as we are on the threshold of a brand new year, it seemed good to consider what light we have to navigate the unknown stretching before us. The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek which means "to reveal" or "to cause to appear" and refers specifically to the star which guided the wisemen to the baby king. An epiphany can also mean any new insight, clarity, or alignment of the cosmic tumblers that feel as if the lights have turned on after a period of darkness.

I imagine the ancient Israelites experienced the morning text as a kind of epiphany, glowing as it does with divine light. It is an announcement made to them during a season of despair, when they had been exiled far from their homeland. Their nation lay in ruins; the Temple – symbol of God's presence and blessing—despoiled by the conquering Babylonians. Where was God, amid such scenes of desolation? What was there to hope for, when the future seemed no more promising than the shattered and scattered stones of the sanctuary?

Bring to the reading of the prophet Isaiah whatever hopes and fears you have today; whatever shadows obscure the light for you; the questions or constraints in your life that defy resolution. Hear God's Word in the reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah, in the 60th chapter, at the first verse [OT section/pew Bibles/690].

[ISAIAH 60:1-6]

In the darkness of night...

Amid the cold of winter storm...

Into the uncertainty of a new year....

...comes the light. No match is struck; no sticks ignited. The light is sheer gift. God brings the light; God IS the light. And then, after the people have stumbled in the darkness, shivered in the cold, been fearful in uncertainty, they are gifted:

with vision to find a way....

with a community whose destiny is linked together

with a future radiant with hope.

At the lowest ebb of their national tide, in exile, weary, a new season of light has dawned. The darkness will vanish in its brightness. A new day breaks, characterized by reunion and abundant goodness. "The wealth of the nations" – camels, gold, frankincense, flocks—will be brought. The reversal of fortunes is barely disguised. Justice will be rendered. The ancient prophecy is referred to again in the birth of Jesus, whose arrival is celebrated by these very gifts, presented by "kings" from nations outside Israel. The gospel writers believed that Jesus was the embodiment of the light—the fulfillment of many long years' yearning. The light of the world has come.

We catch glimpses of how this news is greeted by the people. Some of the exiles do come home. Some of the impoverished ones do receive justice. On the other hand, at least one King—Herod—feels terribly threatened, and takes murderous steps to eliminate that threat. Mostly, however, the world keeps cranking on, spinning out the usual array of good and bad, rises and falls, boom and bust.

On new year's day last year, a NY Times reporter set out to talk with people about their hopes for the new year. He spoke with busboys and stock analysts, college students and artists and homemakers and homeless persons. Overall, people felt that this year would be very much like the last, with little variation.

The reporter talked with one man, a 28-year-old unemployed actor, as he held a video camera waiting to catch the sunrise. "After such a terrible year, I wanted to see the first sunrise," he explained.

“Things still look pure. I need to feel hope, or wonder what in the world I am doing with my life?”

A good question to ponder on January 1. What difference—if any-- does it make that the light has come? There seems to be nearly-universal connection between light and illumination, light and hope, light and newness. At the same time, we humans seem curiously inept at translating that connection into actions that make a difference, either personally or in the world around us. New years' resolutions (even if you bother to make any) are notoriously difficult to keep. The sun rises each day, yet we don't necessarily see it as signaling new possibilities. I received three new calendars for Christmas, and love how the clean white squares line up in orderly fashion, open, promising, seemingly endless. Yet I also know, before many days have passed, my new calendars will look like the old ones, bearing the marks of efforts made, appointments kept, and time stretched nearly to the breaking point. Does the light illumine my days, helping me make choices about priorities and commitments? Does the light enable me to make, not just a living, but a life?

A couple of things in our text suggest some insight. First, the light is a gift coming to us; it is not something we somehow have to self-generate; it's not something we produce or manufacture. It is not something we must earn, or a reward bestowed upon us for good behavior. The light has come to us as a free gift from the One who is light.

But something IS required of us. The first words of the passage are in the imperative: Arise...shine. Stand up...reflect that light. I guess one interpretation would be to see these words as commands. Okay, now, shape up. Get with the program. But I think that violates the sense of the rest of the text, which is all about news that could not have been expected, lived up to, or even IMAGINED by the exiles. I think these words are in invitation—not even so much believe in what sometimes seems unbelievably good—but an invitation TO LOOK. “Arise....” Take one step, make one move, wake up long enough to take one good look. And then SEE what happens. See what God is doing. Find the places where God is at work. Discover the people and experiences where God is restoring and saving and making new. You and I can be mirrors reflecting that light, and together be a beacon of hope which draws others to the light. Not because we see it all, but because we're looking for it. The light of the world has come, and we have only to open our eyes and receive its warmth and vision-producing rays.

How appropriate then that we come to this table, to eat and drink in communion with the light and with one another, to be nourished for the light-bearing which is both duty and delight.

The hope of the world begins and ends with God: "the glory of the Lord has risen upon you....proclaim the praise of the Lord." Here God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. In our beginnings and endings God is there. At the close of the day, and the dawn of a new day, God is there. In crisis, and in the daily grind, God is there. The darkness is transformed by the power of God.

Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight.....

As the ushers bring an offering of stars to you, I invite you to take one from the plates, and let its word illumine your life in 2006. Consider what God may be calling you to do or become through the light of this star. [STARS ARE DISTRIBUTED] Let us pray: Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

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