

The Ingathering of the Dispersed

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

⁵Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,^[a]
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

“Drawn to the Light”

Kerra Becker English

What would it be like to truly be as attractive as this passage from Isaiah 60 conveys? It’s poetry, of course, Isaiah’s imagination reaching out to the dispersed and disheartened nation of Israel, wondering what it would be like for Jerusalem to be like a magnet drawing back her sons and daughters from far away, being the bright light that would entice nations and their wealth to invest in her once again. With the glory of God in the heart of the city, there will be great joy and an abundance of wealth, measured in multitudes of camels. Frankincense and gold will be brought to her, and all shall proclaim praise of the Lord.

Arise, shine. Then the most powerful people and the most beloved people will flock to your doorstep awaiting the dawn. It’s something I really want to believe, but find myself doubting. Good always outlasts evil. The light side has greater endurance than the dark side has power. Love wins out over hate. I’ve based my life and my livelihood on such confessions of hope. But sometimes it seems as though that hope is quite fragile. So, it helps me to remember that Isaiah spoke these words, not into the best of times, but into the worst.

Imagine what it will be like when...

When the darkness is over...

When powerful rulers are drawn to God’s light...

When all sons and daughters have a safe place to come “home...”

When nations at war come to a time of peace...

When abundance is not only reserved for the few, but known by all...

When God's love is known so intimately and so consciously so that hearts will leap with joy...

Just imagine.

We have to imagine, because we aren't there yet. This is a hope, a dream, but it isn't a reality. The reality is that power and greed are corrupting influences on both national leaders and on your next-door neighbor. Wars and rumors of wars are in the news every day. Many homes are not safe, or loving, or warm. Over-abundance and its never ending demand for accumulating more is a problem for some, and lack of even adequate food or shelter is a problem for many. Has God forgotten this prophetic vision? How long must we wait for the light to come?

Too often reality sounds more like what we read this morning in the gospel story. King Herod hears about the light coming into the world and becomes frightened that his own power might be taken away. The whole city of "Jerusalem," as Matthew tells it, becomes scared that wise men from the East come asking the question, "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" The politicians heard in that that they were about to be unseated. The residents of Jerusalem heard in that that their city might not be the most important anymore. The chief priests and scribes heard in that that their own authority might be about to come to an end. So, they panic. So, they tell lies. So, they are willing to use their power to put out the light before it grows too bright. Herod tries to enlist the wise men for information asking them to give him the location of the child so that he, himself, can go pay homage – but they aren't impressed. After seeing the child, Jesus, along with Mary and Joseph they are warned by a dream to go home another way.

The light simply existing, let alone being a bright beacon of hope and encouragement, sometimes has to be enough to give us hope. It's certainly being threatened all the time. Why did it have to show up in an obscure town like Bethlehem? Why did it have to be guarded by a young woman like Mary? Why did it appear in the vulnerability of a human infant? Why was it observed first by shepherds? And why was its location determined by a star on the move that only the wisest astronomers seemed to understand? This powerful story of the light of all life bursting into the world seems barely a sparkler in the beginning.

We have to imagine Jesus lighting up the darkness with the same heightened imagination that Isaiah used to describe what could be the pull of Jerusalem. Sure, now, we can say that Christianity has garnered a presence on the scene of World Religions. People know who Jesus was – at least historically. But I'm not sure that we can attribute the broad success, or notoriety of Christianity solely to people coming to recognize the light. Indeed, as Christianity took off and became institutionalized, it has often been manipulated as a tool of power, as a tool of control, as a tool of things that don't seem all that connected to the light. Rome, and other Western cultures have conquered lands and peoples in the name of Jesus. Race-based slavery was taught to be sanctioned by the Bible up until quite recently. Christianity, as a state religion, flourished in Nazi Germany. Matthew got reality right. Kings with security issues want to put out the light. Priests who should be agents of the light can come to prefer the power of the darkness. Cities and nations presume to be the light on a hill – and maybe they are for some – but it's telling to see where the shadows come into play.

The vision for Isaiah was the light of Jerusalem. The vision for the gospel writers was the light that is Christ. So how can we, now, as a small group of the faithful, kindle that vision of hope? How can we be the tellers of the story of light? If the light is not so easy to see, and yet it

is the one thing that has the power to save us from the overwhelming despair of the darkness, how will we let our eyes adjust the flicker into a flame?

I think we need to replay the vision, ESPECIALLY because it is the reality we so desire to see, but have not yet realized. What is it that draws you to the light? I've been asking myself the same question with little answers so far. What makes me so convinced that the light is where hope comes from? What makes me want to tell the story of the incarnation over and over every year as a reminder that the light that would be the life of all people was coming into the world? Some would call me crazy, or naïve, or delusional. The abandonment of religion is one side of that narrative, and calling Christianity whatever you want it to be is the other. I don't despair because the world is a difficult place, it always has been. Those who would call me delusional for having hope might not know what hope is. But I don't like it when the religion that taught me to see the light gets co-opted and manipulated by other belief systems. I can still call myself a follower of Christ – even as I don't always like what other Christians might be doing. There's something about this light that is hard to describe and only makes sense when it starts to make sense.

Today, I'm not sure that I'm able to make myself as clear as I'd like. I want you to experience the light that leads you, like the star led the wise men from the East. I want you to know the light that is at the heart of our faith, that Jesus knew would keep us returning to God, even in the darkest, bleakest, coldest of times, that Isaiah knew would be the equalizer, the comforter, the wholeness builder in a city like Jerusalem where people have been squabbling for centuries. It takes wisdom to see, to know, to follow – and to go back another way when the darkness grows threatening.