

God Rises

Isaiah 60:1-6

CWZepp, BWCOB, January 1, 2012

They say that there are two kinds of people in this world:

- Those that open their eyes after a night of sleep and say, “Good morning, Lord!”
- And those that open their eyes and say, “Good Lord, its morning!”

Many of you do not need to guess in which of those camps I fall. I am not a morning person; subsequently, I do not generally resonate with cheerful and hope-filled images of the dawn. Typically, my experiences with the rising of the sun happen in the context of youth lock-ins or all-night writing sessions. As such, in my world the dawn signifies the end – not the beginning – of the day.

But I have to confess that I am drawn to the text from Isaiah that was just read. It comes from the lectionary cycle for the feast of Epiphany, which technically will be celebrated on Friday, January 6, but which we are recognizing today. It is a fairly familiar passage of scripture, but it piqued my interest in the past few weeks as I was discerning an appropriate scripture to reflect on for this Sunday, a day when we are ushering in a new calendar year, winding down from the Christmas Holiday season, and bracing ourselves to step back into the regular rhythms of our regular lives this coming week. Moreover, it speaks to the context of new beginnings which often predominate our thoughts and aspirations at the turning of a New Year, with our resolutions and commitments to change, all of which, of course, stem from “our longings for a richer way of being in the world.” (A phrase which I borrow from author Christine Valters Painter.)

And ironically enough, what really caught my attention in contemplating this text was the imagery of waking and the dawn that was magnified for me in reading Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the passage in *The Message Bible*. The wording is crisp:

Get out of bed, Jerusalem!

Wake up!

Put your face in the sunlight!

God’s bright glory has risen for you.

The whole earth is wrapped in darkness,

But God rises on you!

For someone who is not a morning person, these words often atypical inspiration. But for some reason, they caught my imagination. And they would not let me go.

Now I have been at this long enough to know that when a scripture tugs at the strings of the heart and mind, it is generally a rewarding and fruitful experience to follow where it leads, even if I don’t initially know why it captures my attention, or where it will ultimately lead. So, I followed my gut, chose this passage from Isaiah as my focus text for this morning, and proceeded to explore it in more depth.

Its really not very hard to see why this particular text from Isaiah has been chosen for public reading in the church at this time of year. For starters, it provides the back story for the narrative of the visit of the magi to the baby Jesus. The fabled “three kings” from the Orient bearing extravagant gifts of gold and frankincense (along with myrrh) enact the promises of this prophetic vision, putting flesh on the narrative and connecting it to the messianic identity of Jesus. Likewise, its focus on return and celebration undergird one of the central themes of Epiphany – the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, i.e. to the world – not just to some, but to all.

A deeper look at the history of this passage makes it even more appropriate in the context of our New Year’s observances, though not necessarily in a fulfilling way. Isaiah 60 opens what many scholars consider to be the core of the third major portion of Isaiah, often known simply as “Third Isaiah.” These oracles – the prophetic poems of chapters 55-66 – are directed to the Jews of Jerusalem who are returning to the city after several generations in exile in Babylonia. They are coming back to a devastated and war-ravaged city, a city in shambles without a viable economy and without much ground for new possibility. They were disappointed and ready to despair, for, as Walter Brueggemann put it, “who wants to live in a city where the towers are torn down and the economy has failed and nobody can think what to do about it?”¹

But these oracles in Third Isaiah paint a picture of a restored Jerusalem, its coming good fortune, and its destiny as the epicenter of a new-world order promised by the God of Israel. The poet of Isaiah invites these returning exiles to look beyond their present darkness to the dawning of a new day, filled with glory and goodness and God’s promises fulfilled. Jerusalem would again be productive and prosperous, and as a new center of international interest and trade, leaders and traders would come flocking to their doorstep. Caravans loaded with precious treasures like gold and frankincense would pour in from far and wide, bringing fortune and glory to the city, and praises to the God of Jerusalem.

One can understand why this message would bring hope to a people returning from exile to a city that was in a dusty shadow of its former glory. The prophecy was a direct and emphatic contradiction to the present dysfunction of the city and the despair of its people.

But fast-forward 600 years or so. As the story is being retold and repurposed in Matthew’s gospel, wise men from the East show up with gifts in Jerusalem looking for the one who has been born king of the Jews. But not much has really changed for the city. It has certainly not become the shining city of glory that the poet of third Isaiah envisioned. It is again under the rule of a foreign empire. It is controlled by a bloodthirsty and ruthless tyrant. Its people are still longing for the dawning of the new day that was promised. And those magi do not find what they are looking within the walls of Jerusalem, but rather in Bethlehem, at that time a rural, out-of-the-way, beside the point little town nine miles south of Jerusalem.

As I contemplated this context, two things occurred to me. First, the sentiments of this oracle from Isaiah match those of our New Year’s celebrations very well. Every Year, we gather together and ring in a New Year with fervent hopes and desires for a future that is different from our present. We envision the start of a New Year as the beginning of a new era for us,

¹ Walter Brueggemann. “*Missing by Nine Miles.*” in *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann* (2011) pp. 192-193.

complete with all manner of resolutions for change. But soon reality kicks in, and in the end, very little, if anything, ever changes. We found out that 2011 was very much like 2010 which was very much like 2009 and so on. And though I have personally made a few resolutions for the New Year myself, if I was a betting man, I'd be a fool to assume that 2012 will be drastically different from this year. And so I believe it must have been for the Jews returning to Jerusalem and hearing this oracle from Isaiah. Much like a spiritual pep-rally, it raised their spirits and got them going again, but you have to wonder how much really change it really brought, or how much they really expected.

The second thing that occurred to me, however, was that despite this historical context and its problematic appropriateness to our secular observances of the New Year, and despite my general lack of affinity for sunrise imagery, this passage still felt "right" in the context of Christmas and Epiphany. It still appealed to me in some visceral way, but at first I couldn't see why.

Enter a song that has been somewhat of an obsession for me this holiday season. "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie, above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born is us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Immanuel!"

Immanuel. The light *has* indeed come. But it was in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. It was in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, that the magi found the Christ child. It was in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, that the people who had dwelt in darkness would see a great light. It was in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, that the light of a new day would begin to shine. It was in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, that the hopes and fears of all the world would come together in a new way, for a new day. It was in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, that God would shine forth the light of a dawning new day.

"Be born is us today." That line has been replaying over and over again in my heart and mind during this Christmas season. And it finally hit me that that is why this passage from Isaiah, with its sunrise images of the dawning of a new day, appealed to me. Because it is the gospel message of Christmas – the witness of the incarnation – first in a baby in Bethlehem, and then – and now – in us. Yes, God rises – with us. In us!

We face a constant temptation, as did those who first heard that great oracle from Third Isaiah, to place our hopes in a future where things are different. A future where things are going our way. A future where our plans and dreams come to fruition. A future where our intentions and our best efforts yield success and prosperity and peace and recognition. A future that isn't as dark and confusing and hopelessly drab as things are now.

But retelling this poem in the context of the Christmas story – shifting the scene from Jerusalem to Bethlehem – offers us a new hope. A hope that is not founded on our changing fortunes in some hoped-for distant future. But rather a hope that is born within us and among

us. A hope that rises up from within a heart and within a people in whom the Spirit of God has become Incarnate. A hope that comes when Christ is born in us, today and every day.

Which is a prime reason why in the Christian liturgical calendar, the New Year begins not with January 1, but rather with Advent – with a season of preparation and awareness of how Christ is born anew among us and within us – and is made incarnate in the fabric of our lives and our fellowship and our way of being in the world. A season to remind ourselves of our peculiar identity as bearers of the incarnate Christ light to a world that is mired in darkness.

Which brings us today and to the season of Epiphany, which whether conveniently or inconveniently, happens to fall alongside our secular New Year. As such, perhaps we could make some New Year's resolutions appropriate for a people who are not so much hoping for things to change so much as we are hoping *to be* changed. Walter Brueggemann contends that:

Epiphany is a time for the church, the people of God, to go public with its peculiar identity...caught, as we are, between secular self-indulgence and frightened moralism, either of which is safe, but both of which miss the point, not visible, not at risk, not mattering. But of course the world waits for the birth. Much of the church, in its recalcitrant unwisdom, hides safe in the womb, suckled, waited for, not appearing."²

Perhaps our first resolution of this New Year could be to really prepare ourselves to go public with our peculiar identity as people who in whom and among whom Christ is indeed born today, every day. Perhaps having been to Bethlehem, we are indeed ready for the dawn of a new day – a new day that does not dawn on us, but in us.

Perhaps this will be a day of new beginnings, if today God rises...with us and in us!

² Walter Brueggemann. "*Birtherd Public and Peculiar.*" in *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann* (2011) p. 127.