

**Isaiah 60:1-6**

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. <sup>2</sup>For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. <sup>3</sup>Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. <sup>4</sup>Lift 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. <sup>5</sup>Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. <sup>6</sup>A 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.

**Sermon**

Please join me briefly in a spirit of prayer: *God of all times and places, God of all peoples and nations – shine your radiant love upon the people of the world, and inspire in us all a desire for peace, that it may be enlivened through the world. Where there is conflict, anger, hatred and resentment, bring your healing. Abide with us, and stir us all to continue building your realm of love, restoration, and justice here.*

*And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Thank you for reading. As the season of Christmas ends and the season of Epiphany begins, what Jane read is a traditional reading for this exact time in the church year.

There's another story we often read to mark this time, too, though we didn't read it today. This is also the time of year when we tell the story from Matthew's gospel: of the wise ones from the East following a star to seek out and bear gifts upon one they believe is a king. When they do find Jesus, he's not like any king they've ever met before. This story from Matthew's gospel is also the tale of a power-hungry despot, King Herod, that the wise ones meet along the way. Herod is so fearful that when the wise ones mention they're looking for *another* king, a child, Herod sanctions the slaughter of the innocents—a horrific, graphic description that tells us exactly “what fear and insecurity, arrogance and a greed for power can do.”

The story of the wise ones and King Herod wraps a context around the life and times of baby Jesus. They tell the story of Roman oppression, of rulers so fearful and power hungry that they act out in cruelty without another thought. And. The story of the magi and their interaction with King Herod on the way to bear gifts to Jesus is also about people from another country, culture and religion (outsiders) pointing the way to something important to those within a different country culture and faith. This story reminds us that there is beauty and life and truth beyond any conceived boundaries and borders. Those are details we must not forget.

We read both “Arise, shine,” and also sometimes the story of the magi, baby Jesus and King Herod as the stories of Epiphany because it's important that we tell them both, because some things are true even when there's over 2,000 years of history between their time and ours.

So, then, why do we also traditionally read Isaiah's "Arise, shine, for your light has come," on Epiphany? Sure it sounds good next to the story of the wise ones following the *shining* of the star. "Arise, shine" But it's also more than that. These words were written roughly 2,500 ago. They're words that came from a weary people coming home after years of exile. These words, "arise, shine" are words from a people whose return home to Judah, the southern province of ancient Israel, was anything but jubilant as they returned to their city in ruins.

But on a deeper level, we read these stories together not because things are wonderful and the world is at peace. We read them because it's the continuation of the story we hear at Christmas. The world in which Jesus was born was hardly at peace. Jesus was born into a world in which there was great suffering. The Roman Empire ruled the land with fear mongering and quite literally, an iron-clad military. People were oppressed. Society was not equitable or even charitable in some places. There was pain. There was fear. There was heartbreak. There was violence. There was death. There were, perhaps, only rumors of hope. At Christmas, we recognize that this is the world into which Jesus is born. And he was born into this world with a balm, a message of hope, and a call to a different way of living. A way forward that people then, and we the continuing body of Christ now, strive to follow and emulate.

And we read Isaiah's words, "Arise, shine, for your light has come" for much the same reason. We know well that the world is *not* at peace. We read these words, because nothing is as it might be.

At the time this portion of Isaiah was written, the people of Judah had arrived back to the home they prized as a sacred place, a symbol of the sacred bond between people, place and God. And it was in ruins. Those who were in exile returned home to try to live among those who weren't sent away in exile—in a land that is nothing like they remembered it.

And so, as we end Christmas and begin Epiphany, when Isaiah's world and Jesus' world and our world are not as they should be, we boldly read, "Arise, shine, for your light has come," because these words *are an act of resilience and resistance*, a rejection of the status quo, a refusal to see the world as it is and let it stay that way. It's a way of keeping those rumors of hope alive in a time that feels anything but hopeful.

Isaiah's words were a call, a vow, a commitment to energy and trust in a time that felt dismal. And still today these words are a stance, a perspective, a framework in which to live. Hear them again as a vow of resilience. Resistance.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. <sup>2</sup>For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. <sup>3</sup>Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. <sup>4</sup>Lift 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. <sup>5</sup>Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice..."*

Listen to how the words aren't a question. They aren't a suggestion. They are an imperative. As in, do it. Arise. Shine, for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you. Lift up your eyes and look around. You shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice.

These words remind me of one of my favorite thoughts from Dr. Maya Angelou that take on the same imperative tone. She wrote, "Stand up straight and realize who you are, that

you tower over your circumstances. You are a child of God. Stand up straight.”<sup>1</sup> She also said, “If one has courage, nothing can dim the light which shines from within... you are stronger than you may think. Continue.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s what Isaiah’s “arise, shine” is about. It is a stance in the world no matter what reality or fresh horror we witness. It is about how we live in the world, how we go about using our energy in the world. It’s about how we let our spirits rest in God and even rejoice, how we find time to laugh even in hard times. Because those are acts of resistance and resilience in a time that is anything but comfortable or calm, even as we live as a privileged people.

When we read “arise and shine,” we hear words of the prophecy, and words that require action from us. And these are the words with which we begin the season of Epiphany. As much as Advent is about learning to walk in unknown expectation, Christmas is about Christ born among us in humility and as a sign of hope, Epiphany is about living in the light of God regardless of circumstance. About being willing to live in the light no matter how bleak things may seem. About creating a reality of a peaceful, just world—though reality may only show us glimmers of it.

Epiphany, you see, is the season of unveiling. It’s a season of *revealing*, associated with light. Enlightenment. Living into a reality that is still becoming so that even if it’s only in some small way, it becomes reality. Isaiah’s words are prophecy that are meant to be lived out. And though we might be so different, so distanced from the experiences of those who first heard these words, we are no strangers to uncertainty and struggle. We are no strangers to resilient rumors of hope either.

As our church steps gingerly into these weeks and months ahead, which will involve goodbyes and hellos and everything in between, we are First UCC of Northfield, the body of Christ, called by God to trust in the words of Isaiah. Arise. Shine. Your light has come. *You shall be radiant with hope*, God says.

In all that this year may hold, we can trust that we are held together by a God who is with us. I look forward to this journey of ministry with you. So let us, too, glimmer, sparkle, shine, do whatever it is *we can do* to make Isaiah’s words real again today. And together we will trust in the leading of our tender, radiant, and tenacious God. Arise, shine, dear ones. Now is the time. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Maya Angelou, *Rainbow in the Cloud*, 2014, Random House.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.