

January 6, 2019 – Journey worship

TEXT: Isaiah 60:1–6

THEME: Transformation

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

When I was a little girl I loved to visit extended family on the weekends. I frequently invited myself to the homes of my Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins—sometimes for a break from my sisters, sometimes for a change of scenery, and sometimes just because I love being with them. One of my aunts lived in Washington D.C., so it was special to be able to visit her—especially when one had the chance to visit her alone. When I was a guest in her home, she would fling open the bedroom door each morning and burst into song: “Rise and shine and give God your glory, Glory!” Then she’d say, “Good morning, Morning Glory!” Only Aunt Judy could get away with this exuberant a wakeup call. When I read the opening words of this text, I was reminded of Aunt Judy’s wakeup call and her cheerful invitation to face the dawn of a new day.

Although an odd connection, it seems somehow fitting, as this morning’s text serves as a wakeup call of its own. The words of the prophet invite God’s people to get up, open their eyes and see that God is doing something new. Written to a people devastated by the political and social situation in which they live, the prophet issues a word of hope, and proclaims that a new day is dawning— for them and for all of creation.

If you’ve studied the book of Isaiah, you might already know that it was written over time, during the long season of Babylonian exile in the middle of the 6th century BCE. The temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed, the Davidic dynasty overthrown, and God’s people have been scattered and separated. They are a living in an uncomfortable place, as a people with no social, political or spiritual home. They are trying to cling to their experience of identity and to any vestiges of community they can find in the midst of both internal and literal displacement.

Into this context the prophet issues this wake up call. “Wake up!” he says. “Arise!” He doesn’t want the people to miss that God is doing something new. There is now reason to hope. Historically, the cause for hope was a decree issued by King Cyrus of Persia that the Judeans could go home, back to their land; they would be reunited with loved ones; they could begin to rebuild their lives. This is welcome news—in fact, it’s the news they’ve been waiting for. But the prophet reminds us that the transformation about to happen isn’t just a shift in the political order. God is doing a new thing for all of creation, for and through God’s people.

One commentator characterizes it like this:

(T)he nations that have dominated Judah will ultimately come to kneel before it; the exiles will return to the land; lost sons and daughters will be gathered together again. Isaiah even describes how the sea to the west will pour its abundance into the land and the desert to the east with the wealth of camel

caravans bringing gold and frankincense will pour wealth into Zion. The poverty and shame of exile will be overcome when all the wealth of the world pours into Zion and the city of exiles becomes a light to the nations. Isaiah bids the people, "Arise, shine; for your light has come." But this light that has come to Israel is not for Israel alone. "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Throughout the Old Testament, God has used foreigners, outsiders, women, the least expected and sometimes most unsavory characters to fulfill God's will. Although the people and the authors often missed this crucial truth, God has always been the universal sovereign over all humanity and, from the beginning, intended to bless all the families of the earth through the covenant with Abraham.¹

Ok so now you have received your Biblical history lesson. And although that is a wonderful way to start the New Year—what does this all have to do with *US*?

Another story:

Author Lidia Yuknavitch tells the story of being an aspiring author, and receiving a letter in her mailbox letting her know that she had one a prestigious award for a short story she had written. The prize was a trip to New York to meet editors and publishers—a gateway for launching her literary career.

But she says that when she received this letter she put it on the kitchen table, poured herself a drink, sat there in her underwear and stared at the letter all day. She said she “was thinking about all the ways (she’d) already screwed up her life. Who...was she to go to New York City and pretend to be a writer?”²

Yuknavitch tells her story of being lodged in an identity formed by the tragedies that had befallen her and the choices she had made: childhood abuse, addiction, imprisonment, the loss of her daughter, homelessness. She was isolated in an exile of her own creation—formed by all that which had happened to her, and by her inability to believe that she deserved something good. She was unable to even hope that something different—something good—was possible.

But there was a light within her—an ability to weave together stories that drew people in, that taught lessons, that inspired people to continually reinvent themselves, as she had had to do over and over. She had to wake up, see the light within her, accept it, so that she could share it with others.

Sometimes we are so consumed by the darkness that we cannot see the light. We hunker down with a stiff drink and stare into the future with disbelief that anything good is possible again. We get trapped in the mini exiles of our illnesses, broken relationships, anxieties, debts and limitations that we cannot see the light breaking in.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration

² https://www.ted.com/talks/lidia_yuknavitch_the_beauty_of_being_a_misfit

We are consumed by the darkness of oppression & injustice all around us, by government shutdowns and humanitarian crises, by identities that are imposed upon us, by the despair that fills our hearts with stories of hate popping up on our news feed.

But into the darkness of our world, too, God's light breaks in. This light is not just a cool breeze on a hot day, but it is a gift of grace to be shared. Light breaks in with the power of transformation, infusing us with wisdom, healing, joy, love. Light breaks in with a reminder of the identity at our core and the potential we carry—that truth of who we are and whose we are. Light breaks in calling us forward and giving us hope.

Just twelve days ago, many of us gathered upstairs in the sanctuary and lit candles as we sang Silent Night. We were a cloud of witnesses affirming the promises of our faith, that in Christ—that baby born in a manger—God came to us, penetrating the darkness of sin and death and doubt and despair with forgiveness and life, with mercy and hope...with love.

Someone who was at that service for the first time caught me after the service. He told me that he was struck by the power of the witness of the lights lifted in love and hope together. He remembered the headlines of torches lifted in hate at the rally in Charlottesville a year and a half ago, and how on that night, the light illumined hate. So he was struck by our ability to lift the candlelight we carried—small candles, rather than torches—and affirm a different message: that love overcomes hate, life overcomes death,...that the light of the world has come to us in Christ. God has come to us.

“Arise! Shine!” (v. 1). Another commentator writes:

This is not an invitation. It is a command. The light has not come merely to rescue a chosen few from darkness. The light has come so that others will be drawn out of the darkness into the circle of light. “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (v. 3). Grace elects not for privilege but for service.

Those who are privileged to stand in the light have a responsibility not just to receive the light, but also to respond to it. “Arise! Shine!” cries Isaiah, “You have the light... now show it! Get into that darkness and start shining.”³

And so, friends, “Arise! Shine! You have the light...now show it! Get into that darkness and start shining.”

Get into the world and challenge hate. Get into the world and be instruments of hope. Get into the world and welcome the outcast. Get into the world and live out love. Get

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

into the world and let your light so shine, so that through you—through us—God's love might be made visible, God's justice enacted, and hope restored.

May it be so.