

SERMON
“The Shining”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Isaiah: 60: 1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Yahweh has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the people; but Yahweh will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

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

Matthew 2: 1-12

SERMON

Zion is called by the prophet Isaiah to rise up and shine – be joyful because your light has come. The splendor, the magnificence, the glory of Yahweh shines upon you. So, let that light that has been given to you be seen. Then the other nations, still dwelling in darkness, will see the light of God’s glory shining over Jerusalem and will be drawn to it. But they will not come empty-handed. They will come bearing gifts so that the wealth of the nations will flow into Zion day and night. This wealth will come by land and sea: caravans of camels bearing gifts from the southwest desert tribes of Midian and Ephah; gold and frankincense from the Arabian trading center of Sheba. The prophet is saying, the glory of God has come upon you, and great wealth will be yours if you let that splendor show. A great message, but one that gets regularly articulated into a distorted value system.

One of the great leaders of the Reformation, Calvin, preached a message similar to Isaiah’s in his doctrine of predestination. The Calvinists who followed Calvin completely lost the point. Max Weber, the German socialist, has given us a very good explanation of how this distortion came to pass. In his book, *The Protestant Work Ethic in the Spirit of Capitalism*, he compared the differences between Catholic countries and Protestant countries. He discovered that the Protestant countries were the wealthiest countries, and that the wealthiest of these countries were the Calvinist Protestant countries. Now I do not know if this holds true today, but back then when Weber did his comparisons, it appeared that the advice of Isaiah was working for the Calvinist.

The problem was the Calvinist got the end results confused with the starting point. The problem here is that the Calvinist, not Calvin or Isaiah, had turned the accumulation of wealth into evidence of divine election.

They took the doctrine of predestination of one that is the belief that before anyone is ever born that God knows who is going to be saved and who isn't going to be saved. And they asked of it a very important question; "If all this is determined before anyone is born, if the decision about eternal destiny was made without my consent before I ever existed on this planet, how do I know if God chose me? How do I know I am one of the elect?" The answer they came up with was quite simple. This answer has conditioned the religious minds of the United States more than any other that has come down the pipe. The answer to the question, "how do we know if we have been elected of God?" is this; "Whom God has chosen—prosper." Economic prosperity became evidence of divine election.

Weber points out that people, therefore, worked very hard to prove they were of the chosen, special people. Thus was born the "Protestant Work Ethic" and the "Spirit of Capitalism.", and those who succeeded in their driven efforts said, "God has shined upon me. I'm special and had better darn well be treated as such." To be poor became not only inconvenient, it became downright immoral. The Calvinists set themselves up as being special and asked that society bow down and worship them. To some extent, they did.

Today, this philosophy has been taken one step further and has been God completely removed from the picture. Once we allowed ourselves to be taken into captivity, we were certain to be swallowed up by that foreign Babylonian cultural environment. We were certain to lose sight of our God and build golden images of new gods to worship. The new golden gods we hoisted upward—formed in the combined romantic image of wealth and youth. When the closing bell rang on October 19, 1929 at the end of the worst day in the history of the New York Stock Exchange, our gods came crashing down. They had not stood the test of time, and society found itself at a major turning point in its perceptions.

The Israelites also found themselves at a major turning point the day Cyrus of Persia issued a decree allowing the exiles of Judah to return home. But they had been in captivity so long that they had begun to believe that Babylon was home. They are now second-generation exiles in Babylon, plus Jerusalem has been in smoldering shambles for two generations. Then the announcement comes that all those powers that had robbed them of their humanness have lost their legitimacy and their clout and their credibility, and they are free to go home. But they have lived so long in **this competitive, adversarial place defined in terms of empire** that they have come to think it is where they belong. They have come to believe that they were children of Babylon.

To this attitude the prophet says, “Rise, shine, **God has reclaimed power for you and what this God is about to do is restore community, well-being and life-giving order.** “What do you mean you don’t want to go home? Your light has come. The glory, the splendor of Yahweh shines upon you. Now get up and let that splendor show.”

Light, glory, and splendor weave their way through the poetry of the prophet. *Jarah* and *cavoth* are the Hebrew words about light, about the radiance of God and human beings who accept the sanctifying grace of God. The poem begins with a command to let that light shine because greatness has happened to the people. Yahweh has shined on them and released them from captivity. And if they will now shine, even greater things can happen.

The problem is, my modern mind does not know how to shine!

Well, shining is a creative spiritual process. It begins with the formation of a plan...the germinating. Then the idea begins manifesting itself in the planting, the making of bricks, the building of houses, or whatever is needed to give the formation life. Shining is creativity; the activity of God in which we are called to take part.

The poem of Isaiah points us back to the story of creation. The creation story of Genesis not only speaks of light but holds the concept of light in contrast to that of darkness. Isaiah says, “Arise, shine for your light has come. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the people.” And Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth was without form and void, and darkness, *hoshath* (the same Hebrew used in Isaiah). And *hoshath*, darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the water.” Can you hear the similarities?

“In the beginning God.” When we hear these first four words of the Bible the tendency is to think back there sometime. God, as in Mark Connelly’s *Green Pastures*, sits on a white cloud with a long flowing beard and pats his tummy and says, “I think I’ll create me a world.” If “in the beginning”—*berasheth elohim*— we hear and envision a historical account as the first in the order of creation, we miss all the nuances. *Berasheth* means in principle; the foundation on which all evolves, the starting point. So the scripture is saying, as it will time and again, the starting point is God; the creator, God. Not God back there some time in history, but the God of now. And behind it all is one creative mind wishing to set free the creative juices in us—that we may shine.

To shine, we need to get back to God—the fundamental principle of creation. We must go to that light which is within each of us. We must get in touch with God. We must go home. And home is not some **competitive, adversarial place, defined in terms of winners and losers.** Nor is it the ideology of individualism, the quest for youth, or the practice of fear and greed. We do not belong to the consumer ideology that believes more is better. This is not our home and neither is heaven, in the sense of the hereafter. Nor, is it protected church space.

Home is where the creative activity of God is at work allowing light to be liberated from the darkness. To journey homeward, we must get back to the fundamental principle of creation. We must journey toward the light of the rising star that will lead us to Bethlehem.

God has broken through for us, and Matthew uses all the imagery of Isaiah to lead us there with camels, frankincense and gold. And he says to us again, “Arise, shine, for your light has come. God has reclaimed power for you and what our God is about to do is restore community, well being, and life giving creative order. We’ve only to shine. For when we get in touch with the creative light of love, wealth and power will come to our light. Not material wealth, but the wealth of restored community; of restored unity. There is no greater wealth. Amen.