


Sermon 23.01.08

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To see the slides that accompany this sermon:  January 8, 2023

Matthew 2: 1-12

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

"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 my people Israel." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, s me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Isaiah 60: 1-6, 11 (Gafney translation)

Arise, daughter, shine, daughter; for your light has come, daughter,
and the glory of the Holy One has risen upon you, daughter.
For - watch now, daughter! - darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
and upon you, daughter, the Holy One will arise,
and over you, daughter, God's glory will appear.
Nations shall come to your light, daughter,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn, daughter.

Lift your eyes round about, daughter, and see;
all of them gather, they come to you, daughter;
Daughter, your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' hips.

Then, daughter, you shall see and be radiant;
your heart, daughter, shall tremble and swell,
because the abundance of the sea shall turn toward you, daughter,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you, daughter.
A multitude of camels shall cover you, daughter -
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 Holy One.
Your gates shall always be open, daughter;
day and night they shall not be shut,
so that nations shall bring you their weather, daughter,
being led by their monarchs.

SERMON

*Arise, daughter, Shine for you light has come,
And the Glory of the Holy One has risen upon you, daughter.*

*For the darkness shall cover the earth,
And thick darkness the peoples.*

*And upon you, daughter, the Holy One will arise,
And over you God's glory will appear.*

God's glory will appear -
Glory, God's glory, is the visible manifestation of the invisible.
The visible manifestation of God - peace, justice, provision, mercy... like manna in the desert.
God's glory is the invisible made visible.

*Arise, Shine, for your light has come
And the Glory of the Holy One has risen upon you.*

This poem - and it needs to be heard as a poem, is a poem of hope, written, likely, to those recently returned from exile, back to the city, to Jerusalem the center of Judaism.

Back to that place of both destruction and possibility. A place for all the nations to come to...this Zion; daughter of the Holy One. This is a place of transformation - this poem speaks of God's intention for all peoples of the earth to find their way here. For all peoples to know God's glory - to experience justice and well-being.

While a poem, these visions were meant to sustain and empower people to seek, to create, to remain faithful, and to love their God and each other.

Not one of those acts is passive or dreamy but requires the commitment and courage that a shared vision of a better future can produce.¹

(SLIDE)

Arise, daughter, Shine, for your light has come...

Though she doesn't use these exact words, Penny Hall speaks of her epiphany - a vision of a better future.

An epiphany being an insight, an enlightenment, a shining forth².

An epiphany - a shining something, beckoning us forward.

For Penny, it was when she woke up one morning and realized she just couldn't live under that bridge any longer. Disowned by her family after years of bad choices, something happened that day. She realized her life had to change, "I said, this has got to go - I took a hard look at my life and realized I needed to go. I'm not coming back she said - and Penny, she followed something new - found her way out of the darkness. Penny found her way to Magdalene House.

The women of Magdalene House and Thistle Farms³ in Nashville, TN (SLIDE) have a saying that serves a similar function to the visions of the poems of hope and salvation found in this part of Isaiah: "Love heals."

Love heals.

As a community dedicated to survivors of prostitution, trafficking, and addiction, they do not take those words lightly.

Indeed, Becca Stevens, an Episcopal priest who founded this community in the late 1990's, stresses that "love heals" is not a happy ending but a vow.

⁴<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-isaiah-6-01-6-4>

² Diana Butler Bass. *The Cottage: Active Epiphany*, January 5 2023.

³ <https://www.npr.org/2011/04/27/135702451/a-business-that-helps-prostitutes-bloom-in-recovery>

It's a vow that they make to themselves and to one another. (SLIDE) Thistle Farms shares a vision of wholeness that includes socio-economic recovery, family wellbeing, and communal support - it's a vision that finds a number of parallels in our Isaiah text. By the grace and glory of God, they work together to bring that vision to life, to make "love heals" a reality.

Alongside Magdalene House, Thistle farms is a business to build skills and generate income. (SLIDE) They named it thistle farm, after the noxious weeds that grow alongside the edges of the road- on the margins - where the women walked. Thistles grow in abandoned and forgotten places. (SLIDE). They grow, and not only survive, they thrive.

And so these women take those prickly thistles and transform them into candles and body products. Products that heal. Products that bring light into the darkness.

For those at Magdalene House, the thistle flower is a symbol - a symbol of women rising up from the darkness.

Each one who finds her way to that place of community arises, following the light.

Throughout this season of preparing for the light to come into this dark world, waiting for the birth of Christ, we have sat with the stories of women - Hagar, Sarah, Hannah, the unnamed mother of Samson... women who each in their own time and place, made the invisible visible; made space for the God's glory to shine in and through her.

In some ways, the women of old, and the women of Thistle farms - they are not so different from the magi. Those wise ones who were looking for a sign. They, too, were seekers - and not content just gazing upon the star... They got up and followed it to its source.

Their journey involved danger — as a treacherous king attempted to use them to manipulate God's glory for his own evil purposes. And yet they kept going.

Epiphanies.

Epiphanies aren't something we create - they are something we respond to.

Epiphanies grab a hold of us.

Epiphanies ask something of us.

The star is an invitation, a calling to do something — to act.

Epiphanies ask us to pay attention. To arise and shine.

Every day for 25 years, (SLIDE) at their Nashville headquarters, those at thistle farms have lit a candle as a symbol of sanctuary and hope for the next woman.

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

My friends - these signs, these stars, these songs that break forth from the darkness - they are for us, too. We, too, are to *arise*; to *shine* — glory beckons us into the light. God's love and justice made visible. We are not to just remain as observers.

In these past weeks, song birds have been teaching us something about arising and shining; about singing in the dark.

For we have learned that it's out of the darkness that the dawn chorus begins - usually quietly, with only a few singers - and soon these early birds are joined by others, and then still others, until the morning fills up with sound and glory. God's glory - the invisible made visible.

Throughout this season of waiting in the darkness, in the shadows, looking for light, waiting for new life to be born - we have watched and waited, peering into stories of darkness, proclaiming that in the end, night gives way to the day; despair to hope, war to peace, grief to joy, violence to love – and God comes again, like the morning star in the east.

Epiphanies embrace us. They give us life.

Arise, my friends, shine for your light has come.

I wonder where your light might lead.

Other Resources used:

New Interpreters' Bible, Vol 6

Believers Church Bible Commentary, p 444