

Waiting For the Light to Shine

First Congregational Church – Oshkosh, WI

Second Sunday after Christmas – January 3, 2016

Once upon a time there was this refugee couple in the Middle East who were forced to find shelter in a stable for a night... and lo, suddenly there was a heavenly host singing, *glory to God in the highest and on earth peace*, while most people slept the night away and those on nightshift did their work. Thus it was that the Savior was born while the rest of the world did not take notice. As it was in that day, so it is now for the Savior comes at an hour and in a place least expected and the angels (who are always celebrating) sing their hearts out and those who work in the dark continue unimpeded.

The 60th chapter of Isaiah is an extraordinary poem in Hebrew whose theme is found in the phrase *the Glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it.*” Who among us is not aware of Handel’s magnificent composition **Messiah** (written in 1741) in which this text still moves and captivates the hearts and minds of millions of people, world-wide? The central word in the poem is ***Glory...*** and the emphasis on that word related to God’s work in the world by every section of every choir that has ever sung the oratorio and every timpanist who has ever played in the symphony orchestra when performing this masterful work cannot be overstated. ***And the glory, the glory of the Lord, shall be revealed....And all flesh shall see it together...*** This message of the prophet is meant to stir every believer into sensing that it

is time to “arise, for your light has come...” “Lift up your eyes... and see!”

Where God is present, there is no need of sun, moon, and stars. God’s glory reveals God’s power, majesty, and holiness. In this poem we visualize the sun rising over Jerusalem, kindling the whole city in a flame of light; a New Jerusalem where God’s glory dwells. Nations bear their gifts of gold, silver, and precious woods to it. These gifts are designed for worship of God in the holy temple. A new age is about to dawn. Zion, “the city of our God,” the city of David and of the temple, is called forth by the prophet’s poetry with urgent imperatives to rise and reflect God’s glory.

Some biblical scholars suggest that a New Year’s celebration might have been the occasion for this poem. Both its theme and imagery are consistent with such a view. Its date cannot be fixed with absolute certainty but it would be logical to assume that it was written some time shortly after 538 BC when the descendants of exiles began to return to rebuild Jerusalem. Oh the promise of it. The rebuilding of the nation and the sense that God, in all loving kindness, was present in the returning of the children, youth, and young adults.

This prophetic poem calls the faithful to adapt their vision, to lift up their eyes and see in events of the world around them actions of the God Who moves in human history and thereby moves humanity ever closer to God's ultimate realm. Johnathon Edwards, the great Congregational minister of early 18th century, taught that it was part of a minister's obligation to keep aware of what was occurring in the world and share encouraging news with parishioners. In 1723 the young Edwards wrote:

I had great longings for the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world; and my secret prayer used to be, in great part, taken up praying for it. If I heard the least hint of anything that happened, in any part of the world, that appeared, in some respect or other, to have a favorable impact on the interest of Christ's kingdom, my soul eagerly caught at it; and it would much animate and refresh me and ultimately edify those among whom I served.

In Matthew's Gospel, we read the legend of the Magi coming several years after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. They caught sight of something different in the night sky, and interpreted the anomaly to mean a very important person had been born far to the West. They sacrificed their time and risked their lives and fortunes, to catch a glimpse of the newborn king. In Matthew's story, which is the only instance of it in scripture, we note the sincerity and naïveté of the Magi as that is contrasted with the sarcasm, insecurity, darkness and fear of

the Judean King Herod. After learning that prophecy put the birth in Bethlehem of Judea, the Magi journeyed onward not to a stable but a house. Entering it, Jesus was found with his mother Mary. They gave their gifts in joy and thanksgiving, then left quickly for home.

This story is filled with court intrigue, quickly broken resolutions, mystery and ultimately horrible genocide. It is as if Matthew, knowing well what was happening to those who believed in Christ in his day (80 years after the visit of the Magi), decided to tell his readers, and all of us who have followed down through the centuries, that believing in the promises of God's glory come to earth has never been easy. Having faith at almost any point in human history is a courageous, counter-cultural, act that requires not only praise but daring to believe in spite of all odds to the contrary.

The writer of Matthew was bilingual. He wrote not only a Gospel in the Koine Greek so that it could be understood across the diaspora of Christianity, but early Church fathers noted that he wrote a Gospel in Hebrew so Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire could read and understand as well. He was a Levite, a highly educated man from a conservative orthodox tradition. His goal, it seems, was to present Jesus as one who fulfilled Hebrew prophecy. He showed a consuming interest in the spiritual history of Israel as chosen people of God and presented

Jesus as a rabbi who was set on preserving the true principles of the Mosaic Law.

Eleven times in his narrative he reminded readers that there were prophetic teachings behind certain things that happened to Jesus:

The virgin birth, Bethlehem as the birthplace, Herod's massacre of the children under age two, the flight of Joseph, Mary and their son into Egypt, their eventual settling in Nazareth, his healing of the sick, his speaking in parables, his curious choice of both a donkey and a colt to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Judas's experience of thirty pieces of silver – all of this took place because the prophets said they would.

Matthew lifted a portion Second Isaiah's poem and connected it with the legend of the visit of the Magi. They represent the coming of the nations to rebuild the faith and hope of Israel. They bring the same gifts mentioned in Isaiah to the house where the child was found with his mother. They represent those first believers who were not direct descendants of the Hebrews: the Gentiles. Truly, with their presence, God's light shines on all people!

Christ's easy yoke drew dozens and then thousands and millions into the community of faith known as the People of the Way. He really didn't teach anything that was new to those who were steeped in Jewish tradition, custom, and law. But, it felt new to those who were not aware. He is the "new wine," and of all the Gospel writers Matthew takes the

most trouble to decant him from the old skin. The Judaic God had walked in the Garden with Adam and Eve, joked with the Devil, spoke directly to Moses out of a burning bush, bullied Job, and wrestled with Jacob. But it was a scandalous act to send his Son to suffer a humiliating and agonizing death on a criminal's cross. Yet, this message spoke to something deep within humanity. God crucified formed a bridge between our human perception of a cruelly imperfect, indifferent world and our human need for God. For nearly twenty centuries now, generations have found comfort and guidance in the paradoxical hero of the Gospels, the man of peace who brings a sword, the Messiah who fails and shouts his despair aloud from the cross, the perfect man who seems to drift, who seems in most of his actions to be merely reactive and not proactive.

John Updike, one of my favorite authors, wrote of going as a child to a Lutheran Sunday School in eastern Pennsylvania. He was a mediocre student who never won a perfect attendance pin. Some of the sayings of Jesus frankly scared him. But, one day he heard the parable of the talents and took from it the idea that to follow Christ simply meant to live your life fully – without fear. Live it as if there is a blessing on it. Dare to take chances, lest you leave your talent buried in the ground and you never become that person God intended you to be. He wrote that, like millions of other little citizens of Christendom, he was infected with

the idea that there is a double standard in this life, the world's and, because of Jesus, another; and that other is higher. All true life flows from it.

There are vibrant, uncaused moments of sheer grateful happiness that I occasionally experienced when I was doing that which I loved. These were signs of my alignment with it. I still have them, these visitations of joy, and still associate them with the Good News. 'Know too,' Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus' promise, 'that I am with you every day to the end of time.'

In 1939 Princess Elizabeth handed Minnie Haskin's poem to her father King George VI of England to read on his Christmas Eve radio broadcast. These are her words about light in a dark time:

*And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'
And he replied,
'Go out into the darkness
and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light
and safer than a known way.'
So, I went forth, and finding the Hand of God,
trod gladly into the night.*

Amen.