

“We need an Epiphany: Oh Baby, Baby, Baby, Light My Way!”

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Epiphany Sunday, FCMF #1

Scripture

Isaiah 60 (selected verses)

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy... Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels... will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD... to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor. "Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you... No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders... The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end... "I am the LORD; in its time I will do this swiftly."

Sermon

"Arise, shine, for your light has come!"

An epiphany, from the ancient Greek meaning;
"manifestation or striking appearance,"
is an experience of sudden and striking realization.

Its origin also refers to an insight provided through divine revelation.

In Christian tradition, "The Epiphany,"
refers to a realization that Christ is the Son of God.

Churches in the West have generally celebrated
the visit of the Magi as the revelation of the Incarnation
in the infant Christ and commemorate this
with the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6.
Churches in the East follow the Julian calendar
celebrating Epiphany on January 19
with baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.

During Advent our Hope was kept alive
by the words of the prophet Isaiah
who proclaimed to us the promise
that God's salvation "is on its way!"

But hope, just like the baby Jesus,
is often born in darkness.
And not only does God promise to be with us in our darkness,
but God also promises to give us the necessary illumination
to both see it and to understand it.

Epiphany reminds us and also challenges us,
to once again remember that the Christ,
this mere baby wrapped in swaddling clothes
is the Son of God and thus the very source of all light and hope!
Isaiah's words still call to us to awaken, to wake up!
at the dawn of each day and at the beginning of each new year.

Again we must rise and shake off our slumber,
to rub the sleep from our eyes and to realize the yet unfinished task
of God's work of redemption both within us and in our world.

Now it should become readily apparent
why Isaiah 60 is a favorite for Epiphany.

Kings, astrologers and Magi arrived at the stable door,
as per their cue, riding atop their camels
bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.
According to them, they have traversed from a far land
following the light of a distant star which had guided them
through the darkness to this lowly stable.

This striking manifestation had illuminated their path
to this ultimate destination of Epiphany,
truly it became an experience of sudden
and striking realization of a divinely sourced revelation.
The Divine, the Holy One has come to dwell among us!
That great light lured them to manger that contained within it,
God in flesh and bone , a baby who is the very source of light.

But maybe if we knew a bit more about this fella Isaiah
and the times and the places that he lived and prophesied in,
we might find even more insights that can aid us
in our journey towards a deeper understanding
of this great hope that is born in darkness?

Isaiah's words make up a rather long book,
66 chapters actually, of mostly prophetic poetry.
But like most things in the Bible,
there is far more there than what meets the eye.
For instance, it's highly unlikely that a single author wrote all of it.
Biblical scholarship has identified at least three distinct authors.

They have been given various names such as:
Isaiah I, Isaiah II and Isaiah III (being the most obviously creative),

As well as names that refer to the actual times
and locations of their prophetic ministries, such as
Isaiah of Jerusalem, Isaiah of the Exile,
and lastly, Isaiah of the Reconstruction.

The later writings could have been the work of either
a particular disciple of Isaiah's, or as some theorize,
an entire group of his disciples or what is called
"a school of prophecy," dedicated to upholding the vision
of the original prophet named Isaiah.

These followers were dedicated to keeping his views
and teachings alive since they felt they were of critical
importance in helping to get God's people through
one of the most difficult periods in all of Jewish history.

Isaiah I, or Isaiah of Jerusalem,
composed most of chapters 1 - 39
during a period of about forty years from 740 to 701 BCE.

At the beginning of his prophetic ministry
both Jewish kingdoms, Israel and Judah,
were still autonomous entities.
Isaiah I's commission was to announce the coming doom,
the imminent and unmitigated destruction of both Jewish kingdoms.
The northern Kingdom of Israel was the first to fall
to the Assyrians in 722 and then, about 140 years later,
the southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians.

Chapters 40 - 55 not only uses a slightly different style of writing
but it also refers to events that would have occurred
after the deportation of the Jews to Babylon.

There were at least three distinct deportations
from the Kingdom of Judah in 597, 586 and 582.
Each wave would have included only what we might call,
"the best and the brightest" who would have been able to contribute
to the increased wealth and power of the Empire.
But remarkably this community of exiles
also managed to maintain much of their distinctive customs
and religion in spite of the tremendous pressures to assimilate.

Then in 539, Cyrus, King of Persia conquered Babylon
and within a year, this new empirical administration
began to repatriate the Jewish exiles back to Judah.

In a period that lasted around 80 years
not only were the Jews allowed to leave,
but the Persian treasury even financed the trip
and the reconstruction of the walls and temple in Jerusalem.

Don't you just love history?!
I find it quite fascinating myself.

Anyway, the final ten chapters of Isaiah, 56 - 66,
were written during this period of return and reconstruction.
Specifically a period between the return of the first exiles
but before the final reconstruction efforts recorded
in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra which began in 445 BCE.

The Book of Isaiah covers nearly 200 years of Jewish history.
And as I said earlier it was one of the most tragic
and tumultuous period of Jewish history.
The proclamation of coming doom, followed by
the actual decline and eventual destruction,
of two Jewish Kingdoms.

The once royal city of David along with
God's Holy Temple built by Solomon lay in ruins.
Obliterated as well was the autonomous
and theocratic rule which had been ordained by God.

And this was followed by the exile of the most capable citizens,
artisans, soldiers and bureaucrats who were sent off into exile,
an exile which was to last several generations.

It was in that period Isaiah II records the struggles
of God's people to remain faithful as they lamented
the uncertainty and despair of their fate!
Simultaneously trying to balance the hope of God's promise
of ultimate restoration in one hand, while in the other
realizing that another year has passed with no real change
and with a new year beginning without any sign of reprieve.

But the life and times of the three Isaiahs
does not end in only hopelessness and despair.
God did intervene; the exiles returned and a nation was reborn.
God is faithful, God is true
and it is right for us to put our hope in such a God.

And yet at the time that Isaiah III was writing,
God's work of redemption is not yet complete.
There is still much to be done,
literally more exiled "sons and daughters are on the way!"

But the prophet has some very important concerns;
he must warn the populace about this reconstruction.
What kind of people is God calling us to be?
What did we really learn about ourselves and about our God,
from not only the destruction of our past
but also from our time away in exile?

For these concerns he certainly had answers
and that is likely the reason why some of the most familiar
and most loved Isaiah passages come from these final chapters.

According to Isaiah I, the destruction of both Jewish kingdoms
was due to the wholesale violation of the poor,
as well as the headlong rush by the ruling elites
to amass quick wealth and political power at any cost.
Isaiah II's message to those then in exile was to hold on,
to trust that God, in spite of the surrounding circumstances,
has not abandoned them and will ultimately save them!

Isaiah III then reminds those who have returned
that God desires them to become a people who worship him
with both a changed heart as well as with changed lives.
New hearts and new lives that create a changed society,
a new society that bends its will to God's historic demands
of social justice, peacemaking and equality.

But our times and lives are not unlike those of Isaiah III
since our redemption too, is still incomplete.

We are also still on a journey, similarly
returning from living in our respective exiles.
Like most exiles we do not "fit in" with the culture surrounding us.
Like his nation which was struggling to be born,
we too are not a finished product.
We are still not yet the kind of people we want to be,
and we are still far away from that world we hope to build.

But as a new year begins we need to hear Isaiah's words:
"Arise, shine, your light has come!"
"Wake up! Get up and get going!"
"Lights, camera, action!"
Epiphany is here, a blinding light for our path
bursts through all those cracks in that rickety old stable.
Our light streams from a source that is a little baby!

Epiphany is the first Holy Feast of the new year.
How apropos then that we celebrate
this "sudden and striking realization" of Divine revelation
at the beginning of each year!

The simple turn of a calendar page can offer us the opportunity to experience the boundless possibilities opening up before us. But it can also be a time where conflicts can arise as we journey away from what was in the past, as the static of old voices and forces attempt to confuse that which was so clearly illuminated in that light.

But for just a moment longer, allow yourself to be Magi, Astrologers, who over time and space were cursed by a distant light in the night sky. A light that can lead us as well to an Epiphany to a crib that holds for us, as it did for them, a baby who can ultimately light our way!

And we do need light to travel the way ahead, we desperately need The Light, whether it shines from a distant star, the flashlight held by a friend, or that which emanates from the campfire of a community of simple folks who come along side to travel with us.

Each is essential and all are illuminated by that same epiphanal fire of that baby. Light and the hope it can give us is so, so desperately needed both in our lives and in our world especially if we are to kick against the darkness and push back against those forces of despair and death.

So, come on Baby!
Oh please.. baby, baby, baby, light my way!

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