

Overwhelmed with Joy
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Isaiah 60:1-6

- ¹ Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
- ² For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
- ³ Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
- ⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
- ⁵ 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.
- ⁶ 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 the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "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." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

- ⁶ '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.'"

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This morning we meet up again with the Israelites at the time when they have been called out of exile and have been given permission and encouragement to rebuild. Let me explain a little bit more about the exile - when the Babylonian Empire took over, it wasn't like they rounded up every last person and sent them away. To do so wasn't worth their effort. Instead, they only displaced those people with the standing and wealth who had the potential to join forces and stage an upheaval: the politicians, the benefactors, the priests and scribes. Left behind were the peasants, the poorly educated. Seventy years was the length of the exile. Seventy years without leadership or direction left the land of Israel in a sad state so, even though restoration was encouraged, the task at hand was enormous, overwhelming.

We have no written records of what it was like for Mary caring for the infant Jesus but there is much we can safely assume from what we know from our own parenting or that of our friends and families. The hymnist paints a picture of a baby Jesus who didn't even cry when startled by a lowing cow. You may have noticed there is no scripture to substantiate this. If Jesus was anything like us, as we trust that he was, then the chances of him getting diaper rash or colicky or sleeping at odd intervals are high. Which means Mary was likely a tired new mom, sleep-deprived and bleary-eyed. Living in the culture and time she did, she was certainly surrounded by the women of her family assuring her that he would outgrow all of these things, but, on minimal sleep with a crying baby, that can be hard to remember and the knowledge that this small person depends completely upon you can be overwhelming.

Even with holiday preparations and travel behind us, there is much in our everyday lives which has to get done. Some are moving and selling homes, some are facing health crises, some are experiencing tremendous changes, some are devoting their efforts to more worthy causes than there is time, some are facing big decisions or carrying big responsibilities. There is much in our lives to overwhelm us.

We read in John 10 that Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Sometimes that abundance seems to be delivered in to-do lists and tasks to be accomplished but that's not what Jesus meant nor why he came. In both Matthew and Luke we read Jesus' words telling us, "Do not worry about your life...Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?...So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." It is easy, even natural, and understandable to focus on the lists and feel weighed down and overwhelmed. You can trust me on this - I hold black belts in both worrying and fretting.

The prophet Isaiah sees the discouragement of the Israelites in the face of their own to-do lists and offers today's message of hope. In seminaries and even some churches the phrase "already and not yet" is used. It's used to speak of God's kingdom or reign. It's already here but not yet fulfilled. Isaiah speaks in "already and not yet" language. "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." "Then shall you see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice."

Already the light has come and the glory of the Lord. Not yet has the turnaround come to completion where nations pay tribute to Israel instead of them paying tribute to others. Isaiah's words are meant to inspire a shift from overwhelmed to overwhelmed with joy. He says, "Look! Be watching for the good things in the midst of the strife!"

And the wise men come to Mary, a new mother already established in a routine of caring for this child, and they see this baby, this king of great promise, with new eyes. They come to him because they were watching for him. In a world controlled by empires, suffering from wars and oppression and deep, deep poverty, they had been watching for this sign of better things, a better world. In the overwhelming sorrow, they watched for a reason to be overwhelmed with joy.

The funny thing about having life and having it abundantly is that nowhere does Jesus say that means only good things. Life is a mixed bag and the contents for each of us vary. We will be overwhelmed with sorrow and grief and to-do lists. But we can also be overwhelmed with joy and gratitude and relief. The world is ready to hand us the rough stuff; we don't even need to look for it. The good stuff, on the other hand, can be elusive if we are not watching for it. To live life abundantly, we need to be actively present in our lives, for better and for worse. To live life abundantly, we need to live life expectantly, watching, looking. Epiphany occurs.

God's reign, like the good stuff, can be elusive. We must wait for the "not yet" but we can always be on the lookout for the "already." Today, in 2012, we don't hear of God descending from the heavens as a dove and proclaiming things in a loud voice as happened when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. But that doesn't mean that God cannot be found. We just need to be looking, watching, and expecting.

Shortly we will be installing deacons and elders and there are many promises we will ask them to make as a mark of their commitment to leading this church. While not one of the formal questions, I would ask that they, as your chosen leaders, renew their commitment to God to be expectant and to be watchful well past this Christmas season. As members of this body of Christ, I would ask you to support the work of the deacons and the elders, by also renewing your commitment to God to be expectant and to be watchful. Remember, the world provides us with much to despair and lament; let us together, with one another and for one another, claim the promise of Christ that there is life abundant and overwhelming with joy to be had already and even more not yet. Arise, shine; for our light has come. As the wise men did and like the Israelites were called to do, we are called to lift up our eyes. To live expectantly, actively, abundantly.

Let us pray: Gracious God, give us eyes to see the good and the joyful of your reign breaking through already. Amen.