

Overwhelmed with Joy
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
January 3, 2016

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

- ¹ In 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." '
- ⁷ Then 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.

Merry Christmas! Here we are on the ninth day of Christmas so we're rushing it a bit to be celebrating the twelfth day of Christmas, which is Epiphany, yet there's much to celebrate about the twelfth day. We read of the wise men coming to Jesus and in our reading we find the first time the good news of God's incarnation reached ears and eyes and hearts which were not Jewish. This story is the left bookend to the right bookend which is the commissioning found in the last lines of the gospel of Matthew: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."¹ The good news met those outside the faith tradition into which it had been literally born; we are all commissioned to bring the good news, outside, and inside, our faith tradition. Jesus as an infant surely did no evangelizing in the way he brought the good news – he just **was** the good news and it was enough. St. Francis of Assisi most often gets credit for the saying, "Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words." Whether he said it or not, the heart of the message is true. We needn't use words to share the good news. We have been commissioned to **be** the good news.

The people of Israel whom Isaiah addresses understood themselves to be the chosen people of God. Not chosen as in more special than any other. Chosen as in chosen for God's purposes. Chosen to be the good news. Isaiah is speaking to people who have recently been released from exile, where their possessions and their land and even their family members were taken from them, sold off, traded, or just taken. In the same book of Isaiah, written much earlier to the same people of Israel, exiled again and again, it says, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined."² It is these same people and the same kind of darkness and this same light we read about today. "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 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. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." These people stripped of possessions were not poor – they had something far more valuable: the light which had come to them. They were chosen to be the good news.

¹ Matthew 28:19.

² Isaiah 9:2.

Arise! Shine! Today, as we celebrate Epiphany, we celebrate what was set in motion by the rising and shining of a star, which drew people from afar to Jesus. If I may jump around with my astrophysical metaphors a bit, our light has come – Jesus – whose brightness causes us to shine, to reflect his own brightness. You may ask “Who am I to shine?” Or perhaps you think you cannot shine as brightly as others. Or perhaps you are afraid to try because you might “do it wrong” or you might fail. You were chosen to **be** the good news. Jesus did not come to give us the right words, but to show us how we already have been created to be good news, to remind us that we were created as bearers of good news by and through our very being.

If worry about screwing it up holds you back, keeps you from boldly being the good news, then I offer this word. An astute and faith-full man, Jason Soroski, found something in the classic Charlie Brown Christmas as he watched it again recently for its fiftieth anniversary. In the memorable scene where Linus tells the true meaning of Christmas, he and his ever-present security blanket step forward into the light and he begins reciting Luke 2:8-14. This is what Soroski noticed: “Right in the middle of speaking, Linus drops the blanket.”³ Soroski provides the backstory, reminding us that Linus is regularly chided to give up his blanket but, as Soroski says, “even though his security blanket remains a major source of ridicule for the otherwise mature and thoughtful Linus, he simply refuses to give it up. Until this moment. When he simply drops it...[At] the specific moment...when he utters the words, ‘fear not’”⁴ and then continues “...for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” Soroski is convinced this was very deliberate on Charles Schulz’ part and has gone on to suggest this reason: “The birth of Jesus separates us from our fears.”⁵

The early Israelites could not have imagined God incarnate but they knew that God’s light was greater than all the losses, sorrows, and indignities they had experienced. The thing is, its value, the value of God’s light, was...is...so contrary to the value system of the world; God’s light finds its greatest value for the bearer when it is given away. God’s light finds its greatest value for the bearer when it is given away. “Arise, shine” is not merely poetic; it is a command.

We read of the wise men, “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.” Friends, in this world which needs so much joy - overwhelming joy at that

³ <http://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/just-drop-the-blanket-the-moment-you-never-noticed-in-a-charlie-brown-christmas.html>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

– we must arise and shine and be the good news and give away the light that God has given us. It is the Holy Spirit’s power which creates believers; that is not on us, that is not our commission. The command in Matthew 28:19 is most often translated as “Go therefore and make disciples” but μαθητεύσατε can also be translated as “be a disciple.”⁶ Go therefore and be! Arise! Shine God’s light upon others by being light for others! Fear not, for the source of your light has come.

Let us pray: God who brings light and life, we humbly ask your help in being that life and light for others. Amen.

⁶ <http://www.greekbible.com/index.php>