



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN  
 January 5, 2025  
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
 Epiphany Homily

### **Isaiah 60:1-6 (NRSV)**

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.

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 in their nurses' arms.

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. 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.

### **Epiphany Homily**

The prophet had to tell the people about the light:

*Arise, shine, for your light has come.*

I find that strange, because, the thing about light is, you tend already to see it.

You probably noticed Herod also, in our story in Matthew, didn't see the light:

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of*

*the Jews? For we observed his star in the east, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened.*

Herod missed the light.

Which makes you think, then, maybe we're missing something too. How do we miss the light?

Most of us, around this time of year, are trying our very best, to capture the light.

*We want to lose 10 pounds.*

*We want to stop doom scrolling social media.*

*Maybe start reading again.*

*Maybe spend more time with family.*

*We want to... We need to... We gotta stop...*

We don't want to miss the light.

Chris Huntington wrote an essay for the *New York Times* in their series 'Modern Love.' The essay is about a ritual Chris has with his son. Every night, after they've read together, they talk about the best parts of their day.<sup>1</sup>

And one night – we all can relate to this – Chris was distracted. He was, ready to be done with it. He had other things to do. Emails to answer. Charts to finish. You know: working, trying to capture the light.

And then, as he's leaving, he says to his son, 'Oh, wait. We forgot to talk about our best moment today. What's the best moment of your day?'

And his son says, 'This is, Daddy. This is.'

I can relate.

Not to this particular example, mind you. Far from distracted, I take reading *Harry Potter* to my son **way** more seriously than I should. I have a whole cast of voices. I sound more like Professor Snape than Alan Rickman ever did: "*Hello Potter!*"

---

<sup>1</sup> Kirsch, Melissa, host. "The Year in Wisdom." The Daily Podcast, *The New York Times*, December 31, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/31/podcasts/the-daily/2024-best-advice.html>. The original article is Huntington, Chris, "Learning to Measure Time in Love and Loss." *The New York Times*, October 18, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/18/style/modern-love-classic-learning-to-measure-time-in-love-and-loss.html>

But...I can relate, to the distraction, always looking ahead at what's coming next instead of seeing what is.

I recently heard an interview with the editor of 'Modern Love' for the *New York Times*, talking about this moment in Chris Huntington's essay about his son. This is what this editor said:

*When I read that, tears sprung to my eyes, and I thought about my own experiences with my reading to my son and to my daughter and the distraction that I used to feel... 'What am I going to do tomorrow, and what do I have to do for work?'*

*And just that reminder, that small moment of:*

*This is your life.*

*These are the important moments of your life.*

*Be in them.*

It's so hard to be in them, isn't it? It's hard, these days, just to look up, and see the star. To realize that we don't have to capture it. It's already above us.

Israel has a similar trouble. You'll remember the later chapters of Isaiah are written in the aftermath of Israel's exile to Babylon. By chapter 60, the exile is over. The people have returned home: *Arise, shine, for your light has come.*

A few verses later, the prophet tells the people to: *Lift up your eyes and look around...your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.*

Families separated in the exile are reunited.

*Look around!* Says the prophet. Your light has come!

It's here, now!

But there's a tension in the text, between see what is and looking for what could be. What should be. What might be next on the horizon.

Israel doesn't just stop in the glory of its return from exile. The people, want vengeance. In what the majority of scholars believe to be a later addition to the chapter, v. 12 proclaims

*For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste.*

In our own verses, its promises: *The abundance of the sea shall be brought to you; the wealth of the nations shall come to you.*

You can't really blame the people. Can you imagine 70 years of exile? Whole generations laid waste?

Of course, after coming home, you would want vengeance; of course, you would want more. They deserve more!

*A multitude of camels shall cover you – meaning the nations, bringing their riches on pack animals. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

But, there's a tension here:

Between what is: *arise, shine; for your light has come.*

And the vengeance that might be: *the nation...that will not serve you shall perish.*

It's the tension, between seeing the light, already here, and striving for more, looking ahead.

It's a tension pulling at our own hearts, too, not at the scale of post-exilic Israel, mind you. But it's there, in smaller ways: The tension between gratitude for what is, and striving forward to possess what could be.

I feel it. More now, than any other time of the year. Instead of looking back, and seeing with reverence and thanksgiving that which was and is, I think of, I worry about, I dwell upon that which is coming.

And no, there's nothing wrong with striving, looking ahead, goals and resolutions. The Book of Isaiah, itself, is perhaps most famous among the prophets, for pointing the people forward to the new thing God will do:

*For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.*

*Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;  
they shall run and not be weary;  
they shall walk and not faint.*

And God knows, with Isaiah, we wait for, we look for, we strive for, we pray for more justice and equity in a world of pain.

And yet, and also, I find it curious, Isaiah's first line, had to remind the people just to look up. Don't forget. Don't miss it. *Your light has already come. Arise. Shine.*

Don't be so focused on what *should be*, that you forget *what is*.

You see, religion has a way of doing that: tearing us away from what God is doing in our midst. It is always forward looking. Whether it is the Evangelical idiom to 'Get right with God before you see him in the next life'; or the Prosperity Gospel saying you can pray your way to good fortune. Or even the progressives, promising that the God of justice is coming.

It's not just religion, either. Or rather, it's the secular religion of the modern wellness industry, that promises happiness is always just a yoga routine, a new diet, a meditation class away.

It's not all that bad, really.

But in all this striving, and even in all this hope, Isaiah 60, has a word for us: "While you're looking ahead, don't forget, to look up, and see: *Your light has come.*'

*Has come.*

*Has...come...*

How are you missing God, manifestations of God, the love of God, in your midst, right now? Because even in the dark times that love, has a tendency to show up.

At the end of the year, I heard an interview between the writers Kate Bowler and Kelly Corrigan.<sup>2</sup> And it was supposed to be an interview wrapping up the year, talking about the unexpected places of happiness that they had experienced.

And oddly, these two women, spent much of the first part of the interview talking about witnessing the deaths of family members. Not family members they hoped would pass, mind you. It wasn't that type of interview. But rather, people, who had been ill for some time, loved ones ready to go. And the moments of tenderness they witnessed, in those long, drawn out, difficult days.

Kate Bowler talked about her grandfather. He had been an obstinate man, a wartime bomber pilot in his day, a real rough and tumble kind of guy; he had actually, been demoted in the military, because of his temper.

One day, Kate sat at her grandfather's bedside when he was in hospice, all but gone, his eyes closed. Kate looked at his hand, which by that time, was so so small, just paper-thin skin. And she held it, and she asked, 'Grandpa, how many people have you punched with this hand?' And the nurses looked at her like she was crazy. Like, 'Okay granddaughter, I think you've had enough time.' And things got quiet, for about a minute, until grandpa responded:

"23! Maybe 24!"

Kelly Corrigan, the woman interviewing with Kate Bowler then talked about her own mother's passing. Her mom was 84, had been in poor health for some time. And then one day, she just said, 'Yes, it's time.' To the consternation of her physicians, she stopped her treatment for an infection. Took out the drain. Quit the antibiotics. It was just, time. She passed in 10 days.

On one of those last days, Kelly Corrigan put ear buds in her mother's ear. Her mom had always been a big music fan: Kris Kristofferson, Neil Diamond, Simon and Garfunkel. She loved 'The Boxer' by Simon and Garfunkel. Kelly played, like 13 songs for her mother, with no change. No response. So, she started to worry, 'Am I driving my mother crazy. She has no way to tell me to stop.' And, she was watching her mom so closely, for any signs, of discomfort or whatever.

---

<sup>2</sup> Everything Happens with Kate Bowler, "Feeling Happy? Navigating the Highs and Lows with Kelly Corrigan with Kelly Corrigan." Season 13, Episode 17. December 24, 2024. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/feeling-happy-navigating-the-highs-and-lows-with-kelly-corrigan/>.

And then ‘The Boxer’ came on, and, just under her breath, she heard her mother whisper,

“Lie-la-lie. Lie-la-lie-lie-lie-la-lie.”

And Kelly knew her mother was still with her, for a fleeting moment.

Think about that.

- Think about, all the times her mom heard Simon and Garfunkel and it warmed her soul.
- Think about, how she shared that love with her daughter.
- And how it became their way to say goodbye to each other.

There are countless moments in our lives. They come and they go. But in these fleeting moments, the love of God is made manifest, in the ways we are with one another, with our neighbors, with the least of these, with ourselves.

They are so easy to miss.

And yet when you see them, they are a blazing star in the heavens. Pointing to a love that transcends us and yet comes to us and makes it home in our souls.

Even in the darkness, God comes to us.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come.*

So, this year, as we look ahead. As we dream of and work towards what may come. Even as we yearn for better days.

Let us not forsake the ever-present God of love...with us. Between us. Within us.  
*A light that has come.*<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> Though I approached it from a different angle and perspective, I must credit my former pastor, the Rev. Dr. Dave Davis, for the theological insight I learned from him in a recent sermon, which clearly impacted this sermon. See “The Is-ness of Christ.” Nassau Presbyterian Church. Princeton, New Jersey. November 24, 2024. <https://nassauchurch.org/2024/11/the-is-ness-of-christ/>.