

“Imagine Light”

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Isaiah 60:1-6 (NRSV)

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 in 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.

Terrors lurked everywhere. Peering over the edge of his blanket, the four-year-old boy stole a furtive glance around the room. In the half-light of the streetlamp filtered through *Thomas the Tank Engine* curtains, ordinary objects were transformed into the stuff of nightmares: The backpack in the corner was a troll about to confiscate his favorite toys. The nightlight shrouded by the stack of newly laundered clothes, the scanning gaze of a rogue cyborg. The towel hanging on the back of the door, a ghost menacingly blocking his only possible exit. Hiding his head under the covers, he attempted to reassure himself with the words of his parents, “It’s just your imagination.” A sudden gust of wind caught the branches of

the dogwood outside, raking his window with its claw-like twigs. “Mommy!” Footsteps approached, the doorknob turned, and for the third time this week, his mother’s hand flipped on the light switch. The flood of light momentarily blinded him, but as his eyes adjusted, he could see once again his cozy bedroom, filled with familiar and beloved objects.

Imagination can be the realm of hope and possibility or a place of fear and disaster. Sometimes the darkness of anxiety and despair can overwhelm us. We need a light to shine, to help us see beyond perceived threats and dead ends.

Throughout the seasons of Advent and Christmas, we’ve traced the visions of the prophet Isaiah from the precarity of a small nation surrounded by power-hungry empires, through the despair of impending invasion, to promised restoration and new life. The historical context of Isaiah’s prophecies offer valuable perspective on how much faith it took to see what he foretold. We imagined *peace* when the political situation was deteriorating. We imagined *hope* when the siege engines were being deployed around Jerusalem. We imagined *joy* when famine and death brought only despair. We imagined *love* when Zion was no more than a distant dream. We imagined *God-with-us* in the coming of a child into a world of adult-sized fears and global problems. We imagined *new beginnings* in the return from exile and the restoration of Jerusalem. Today I invite you to imagine *light*. Not just light in the everyday sense, but to exercise your imagination to see *God’s* light.

To speak of imagination in relation to prophecy might seem odd. If these were visions given by God through Isaiah to God’s people, isn’t it more appropriate to speak of God’s promises or God’s plan, of divine revelation? What role does imagination play when we’re talking about prophecy?

We have the benefit of more than two-and-a-half millennia of historical perspective. We know that Israel and Judah were defeated and carried off into exile, that the temple was destroyed and God's people scattered. We know that what seemed like the end led in time to a new beginning. We know that Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt. We know that even those who were scattered provided a foothold for the explosion of faith that would follow. We know that the prophecy of God-with-us was met in the coming of Christ.

When we read the words of Isaiah, we see them as prophecies fulfilled. Many Christians read Isaiah as pointing to the birth of Christ, divine light entering our world, visited by distant travelers bearing gifts of gold and frankincense. But Isaiah was addressing these words to Zion, God's people. When we read his prophecies, we may find comfort in the knowledge that God's hand was active in history. But the people of Isaiah's time didn't have that benefit. The future still lay open before them – uncertain, mysterious, dangerous. There was no assurance that what Isaiah described would happen. It took tremendous faith to trust in the vision he offered. It took imagination to see the dream Isaiah saw.

Today we celebrate the Epiphany, the day we remember how the light of a star led the magi to find the Christ Child. The word *epiphany* comes from a root word meaning "reveal." Nothing is more revealing than light. Light is at the center of Isaiah's prophecy we focus on today:

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.*

This portion of Isaiah is late in the book, a section scholars refer to as Third Isaiah. It was written after the Exile, much later than the earlier passages we read at the beginning of this worship series, a different author picking up the tradition and writing in the same style. You can

hear the joy and optimism reflected in the opening verse, written as many Judeans returned from captivity to their homeland to rebuild Jerusalem and all that they had lost.

But all was not what they had hoped. Earlier prophecies from *Second* Isaiah foretold a return from exile, promising a verdant and prosperous world. But what the returning Judeans found instead was poverty and famine and ruin. The temple had been destroyed, its furnishings ransacked. Crops were decimated, homes burned. The life they returned to was not the life their forebears left, nor was it the life they had imagined they would find. They had been through so much. Now, at the very moment of rebirth, their hopes were deflated.

*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.***

It may not have been the life they envisioned, but life was still before them...and God was with them. *Rise up! Your light has come! The glory of the Lord has been revealed!* Not only would they be okay, but Isaiah promised that in time they would shine so brightly that:

*Nations will come to your light...
Then you shall see and be radiant.*

Third Isaiah describes light breaking through the despair, enabling the people to see what they could not yet see. Isaiah's words called for imagination – not just ordinary imagination, but *prophetic* imagination. Prophetic imagination is not “frivolous fantasy,” a land of make-believe divorced from reality. “Rather, it is marked by the courage, the faith, and the wisdom to imagine and call forward the world God desires us to make.”¹

¹ Emily Askew. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year A, Volume 1. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2010), 196.

When I had the time and the space, I loved to garden. I enjoyed working the soil, tending the plants through their growth cycle, monitoring rainfall and nutrients to make sure everything was just right. I loved harvesting strawberries and carrots and peas early in the season, peppers and squash later. And the taste of those first tomatoes! The long days of summer sunshine found me regularly pulling weeds, securing vines, eradicating pests, picking the day's offerings. It was a love that didn't wait until the summer, but began coincidentally around this time of year, in the height of winter as the first seed catalogs began to arrive. I would meticulously dog-ear pages and circle the varieties I wanted to try in the coming season.

Still in the throes of winter, I would set up the worktable in the basement with grow lights, warming mats, and pellets of compressed potting soil. Seeds were sorted by days-to-maturity and variety, then inserted into their cups and watered just so. The violet of UV lights glowing through the glass block basement windows foretold warmer days and home-grown vegetables. At first, those lights shined on nothing more than a countertop covered in tiny cups of dirt. Even after days of patient, careful observation, only the tiniest, most fragile signs of life could be seen. But I could already imagine the lush garden those tiny sprouts would become.

Isaiah proclaimed that the light had come. Light is revealing, but sometimes it takes imagination to see beyond what *is*, to what *will be*. Isaiah urged the people returning from exile to see more than what their eyes could observe. They needed to see with the eyes of faith, to imagine light and life, hope and promise, God's presence and favor.

As the light dawns on this new year, what do you see? Throughout this season, we've invited you to exercise your imagination along with the prophet, to see with the eyes of faith what God wants to reveal, Over the last year, we've invited you to use your imagination to

discover God's hopes for us as a church, a vision that requires seeing with more than mere physical observation. Much of what you shared is hopeful and inspiring: connection, faith in action, centered in Christ, diversity, commitment to justice and equity, meeting the needs of our neighbors. Your vision is helping us develop a vision for Church of the Saviour for the next several years. It is an exciting time, but one that requires us to use our imagination to see what is not yet visible. Even as we exercise our imagination, we know that *God is ahead of us*.

Aligning our vision with God's vision is essential if we want to live into God's hope. Maybe you see worship attendance hovering at 60% of our pre-COVID numbers; *God wants us to see a core of committed disciples with room to grow and an opportunity to reach new people in new ways*. You might see an online congregation approximately equal to our Sunday in-person attendance as a sign of diminished participation; *God wants us to see a discipleship opportunity to move from observation of worship to deeper engagement in worship as well as the other four essential practices: participation in a small group, joining in a service project, living generously, and sharing our faith story with others*. Maybe you see an empty parlor and limited interactions with each other before and after worship; *God wants us to see an opportunity to rebuild community through a more sustainable coffee hour and fellowship ministry*. Perhaps you notice many unfamiliar faces and miss seeing longtime friends at church; *God wants us to see new people to be welcomed and encouraged in discipleship, and that the time is right to reach out to let friends know we miss them*. You may be aware of big, life-transforming mission projects but not know how personally to get involved; *God wants us to see possibilities to meet the needs all around us by taking initiative, stepping up, and finding new ways to make an impact, both inside and beyond the church*.

By practicing holy imagination, we can learn to see God's hope springing forth in surprising places. *Lift up your eyes and look around. Then you shall see and be radiant.*

As we're training our eyes on the light and engaging in vision, it's important to remember that the light we shine to the world is not our own. We reflect and magnify the light of God – a God of endless possibilities. When we follow God's light, we can begin to catch hold of God's vision for us. And God's vision is always greater than ours. I believe God is calling Church of the Saviour *right now* to practice holy imagination, to see the light, and to share that light.

People of God, *Arise, shine, for your light has come.* Thanks be to God. Amen.