

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/6/2013, Epiphany Sunday  
Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:1-2, RSV)

God bless those Wise Men! The old saying is true, “Wise men *still* seeking him!” So do wise women, girls, and boys. One plain and good thing we can say about those Wise Men of old is that they were energetic. No slug-a-bed for them. The star of the new king shines in the East, and those Wise Men are off to seek this newborn king. No delay. No putting off till tomorrow the good they can begin today.

## **ARISE, SHINE**

To put the journey of the Wise Men in perspective, let me begin with a line from this morning’s First Lesson, from Isaiah 60. It speaks of light and of arousing oneself because of that light. The verse starts off this way:

Arise, shine; for your light has come... (Isaiah 60:1, RSV)

This text puts me in mind of those happy days of old, when Carol and I were young parents, when we would wake the children for the new day. It is as if I can still hear the sweet voice of my wife, Carol, as she tousled the hair of our boys when they were little: “Rise and shine, sleepyheads. The sun is up. The day has come. Let’s get moving.” And move they would. Many a parent can remember this: the children wake up, ready to go. They have been sleeping the sleep of the innocent. They are rested. Their energy bursts forward quick. They make an effortless transition from sleep to the things of the day. They bound out of bed, head for breakfast, zoom off into play or school or whatever lies before them. They had been sleeping, which was the right thing for them to be doing, for it was dark. But now the sun is up and it’s time for *life*! Rise and shine, sleepyhead. The day has come. Arise, shine, for thy light has come.

My theme is this: It is one thing for light to come; it is something else—something more energetic—to arise and shine now that the light has come. The

Wise men rose and shone when the light came. They gave us a good example of holy energy seeking Christ.

And I believe that now is the time for rising and shining for us. Especially this is on my heart for our congregation in this our anniversary year. In this year of our Lord 2013, we have reached the noble age of 150! As I mentioned in my sermon on New Year's Day, that is a good long time. Why, not even Ann Siemer is that old. So, we have reached a century-and-half in age. We have had the light of the Gospel all these years. I think the very best way for us to celebrate our anniversary now is for us to rise and shine, both in our individual lives and in the life of our congregation. Let this be a year of spiritual renewal for us.

So, I have begun this sermon by lifting up Isaiah's exhortation to rise and shine because light has come. Now let me place that saying in context.

## ISAIAH

In our First Lesson, the prophet Isaiah is acknowledging that Israel has been struggling—dragging herself onward in the darkness. It is a heavy darkness that has depressed the spirit and robbed the people of joy in life. That is what being conquered by mighty empires can do to you. Israel has been beaten upside the head, knocked senseless, concussed, confused, and left staggering by her Babylonian captivity and then by how dispirited the work has been at restoring Jerusalem.

What had become of all the promise of her youth? Tremendous promises had been made to her in the beginning. The LORD had spoken of descendants as innumerable as the stars of the nighttime sky and the grains of sand on the seashore. Even grander, she had been promised that through *her* all the world would be blessed. This is a crucial distinction, for what good is it to have a multitude of descendants if they are a bunch of lazybones? If those children and grandchildren and so on are basically selfish and grasping and a burden on earth, well, we will love them, no doubt, but it is not especially good news for the world that their numbers will exceed the sand on the seashore.

But no! The children of Abraham were promised a noble destiny. They were not to be a burden on earth, but a blessing:

<sup>1</sup>Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3, NRSV)

What an extraordinary and large-hearted notion for a small nation to have about itself: that it is meant for the blessing of the world. An insignificant stretch of real estate: that's what Israel was compared to the mighty empires of the day. But small or no, Israel believed about herself that she was meant for great things for others. Her God had told her so, and she did not doubt her Lord.

So, in our First Lesson Israel is addressing a downhearted Israel. Israel was like a child with many advantages and the settled conviction that she was meant for great things, but for whom things just were not working out. It has to be said: in good measure, the reason things had not worked out was her own fault. Maybe she had presumed on her advantages, figuring that she would become a blessing on earth without really trying. And then there was this: Israel had too often been a wayward child. She had been clearly instructed in the way she should go and the path in which she should walk. She had been instructed by her God through Moses and the holy prophets. But too often she had rebelled, ignored, and violated the ways of the Lord. She had been warned often enough, exhorted many a time, punished and forgiven repeatedly until now her story has grown old. By the time of our First Lesson, Israel has squandered many years and many opportunities. If a nation could walk with drooping shoulders and bowed head, so Israel would walk. I think she was well in the mood for an encouraging word.

And such a word Isaiah gives her! In today's passage, Isaiah speaks of light. He announces to Israel that her light has come. He says that the glory of the Lord has arisen upon Israel and that because of this light, the nations shall come to Israel. He speaks of the return of wandering or exiled children, and, naturally, of the joy that the parents feel to see them again:

<sup>4</sup>Lift up your eyes round about, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far, and your daughters shall be carried in the arms. <sup>5</sup>Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice...  
(Isaiah 60:4-5, RSV)

The prophet also speaks of the wealth of the nations coming to her, of camels and caravans and gold and frankincense. And best of all, he speaks of the nations coming to Israel and proclaiming "the praise of the LORD." "The LORD," in capital letters. That means *her* God. It means the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. It means the great "I AM." The nations have their own gods—of course they do. But Isaiah says that the nations are coming to praise the glory of Israel's God, which is fitting, since Israel believed that her God was the Maker

of heaven and earth and all those many souls living in the nations. Isaiah speaks of mighty things, I say. He speaks of glorious things for downhearted Israel.

Now, it is not the fate of prophets to be universally admired. Indeed, there would come a day centuries down the road when our Lord Jesus will sit on a hill overlooking Jerusalem and lament how cruel Israel had been to the prophets her LORD had sent her:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! (Matthew 23:37, RSV)

So, there were probably some people in Israel who doubted this tremendous preaching of Isaiah. They might have thought him a fool. They might even have been angry with him for raising up what they thought to be false and misleading hopes.

But even for the people of Israel who believed Isaiah and his preaching of light, who could blame them for looking around and wondering what in the world he was referring to. Where was this light? Where were the camels and the gold and frankincense? Where were the new believers praising the glory of the LORD?

## **A PROPHECY OF ONE TO COME**

I think it is fair to say that Isaiah's generation never actually experienced the good things of which Isaiah spoke. He might have planted the seeds of hope in them, so that their spirits were lifted up some, but life went on pretty much as before. And the great promises of Isaiah were probably dismissed by many or simply filed away in the heart as promises for the future—a future that the people themselves might not live to see, unless there be a resurrection from the dead!

## **THE FESTIVAL OF EPIPHANY**

Now we come to the drama of our Epiphany Festival. It is one of the highest festivals of the church year, and it is one of the most large-hearted of them all. For on this day, the church gladly takes our place alongside Israel and says of her:

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

The church claims no other light than this: the light promised to Israel. And we claim no other Savior than this: Israel's own Jesus, born in Bethlehem of Judaea and raised in Nazareth of Galilee.

Those good old wise men, whose statues have been quietly progressing from windowsill to windowsill here at Immanuel, have this morning reached the Christmas crèche. They represent us! Late-born, modern folk centuries removed from Isaiah of old and an ocean removed from Bethlehem: the wise men represent us strangers to Israel who nonetheless have seen Israel's light and have come a running.

## **LET US TOO ARISE, SHINE**

This Child of Bethlehem is Israel's light, we believe, and also our light. And if I am not mistaken, it is high time for us to "arise, shine, for your light has come."

One of the saddest lines in our hymnal, in my opinion, is verse two of the hymn *The Church of Christ in Every Age* (LBW 433). That verse goes this way:

Across the world, across the street,  
the victims of injustice cry  
for shelter and for bread to eat,  
*and never live before they die.*

That phrase can break the heart when we think of the children of Connecticut murdered by the madman: "and never live before they die."

Likewise, "across the world, across the street, the victims of injustice cry." Do you not flinch nowadays simply to watch the news on television or programs about starvation and disease across the world? Too many people are dying before they live.

And if we are not careful, we will be among them! I mean, we are warm and breathing and have a pulse and all that, but are we yet living? You have heard the phrase "a late bloomer." Is that us? Are we among those who are late in blooming?

Isaiah imagines a situation in which light has come—it really has—and yet the people need to wake up. They need to "arise, shine." Perhaps you and I should count ourselves among those who need to start shining.

You might have experienced something like this before, either in your own life or in the life of someone you know. That is, years went by, and then, suddenly, it was as if the person woke up and began to live. The sleeper arose and stepped forth into life.

Maybe by God's grace such a thing has happened to you yourself. Dull sleep suddenly fell away, and you began to really live for the first time. People who

knew you could see the difference. They might have loved you beforehand and thought you were doing fine, but now, you are doing even better! Your energy is higher, your discipline is stronger, you have a sense of your path in life, you have renewed passion to do something good in this world, and Satan watch out: a live one is afoot!

On this festival of Epiphany it is as if Mother Mary and all the saints come to you and me, tousles our hair, and say to us, "Time to rise, sleepyhead. Christ was born for you! You have him on your side. You are meant for some good things on this earth. You are meant for some holy things. Turn to them now." Yes, let us arise, shine, and go forth into an extraordinary life of goodness, in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.