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Epiphany Sunday – Isaiah 60: 1-7, 17-18; Matthew 2:1-12

The Song of Salvation

I simply cannot imagine what it must be like to live in Israel or in the Gaza Strip these days. Rockets exploding in Israeli streets without warning. Palestinians getting a quick alarm call to gather their kids and get out of the building because another bomb was on its way. Tanks coming over the border. Men with guns and masks getting into formation. Children in **both** places absolutely traumatized by the never-ending war over religion and land and politics and culture. I cannot imagine living in “the Holy Land” right now.

But heartbreakingly enough, the experience of war and terror is not a new experience for any of them. Isaiah 60 reflects that historical reality. God’s covenant people of Israel had spent a few generations living as exiles in Babylon, cut off from their Temple, their traditions, each other. And while in Babylon they had all teetered on the edge of losing their religious identity—tempted by all the money, all the excess, all the reckless living.

They had experienced what many first generation immigrants experience in this country when they see their kids and their teens wanting things they never would have wanted back home, refusing to speak their parents’ language, wishing that they could just blend in and be like everyone else, embarrassed that their parents stuck out like sore thumbs at PTA meetings. The Jewish people in Babylon lived those kinds of temptations and struggles. While living in Babylon, they had teetered on the edge of losing their religious identity, but they had survived.

And finally, Babylon was defeated and they were allowed to return home to Jerusalem, to their holy city. Everything was supposed to be okay. Families were going to be reunited. They would rebuild the Temple, making it better than ever. They would help each other rebuild their homes. Everything was supposed to be okay.

Yet, as the exiles arrived and glanced around at their former hometown, the bombed-out remnants of Jerusalem clouded their vision. Instead of the sweet smell of homecoming, their noses filled with the putrid smell of war and destruction. Their towers had been torn downⁱ. Their holy places bombed and desecrated. The financial markets were in a downward spiral and people were losing their jobs and their pensions. The new word on the street was “bailout.” The housing bubble had not just burst but exploded. And instead of spending their time rebuilding the Temple or helping their people get back on their feet, the religious leaders were too busy arguing and taking votes, splitting and starting their own churches. Big dreams gave way to deep despair. Once again, the exiles’ eyes fell to the ground. Their hearts sagged with the fear of it all. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. Life was not supposed to feel like this.

The poet stood in their midst. He looked around and saw their eyes, full of terror, full of despair. He, too, saw the burned out buildings, the fallen towers, the failing economy. He, too, smelled the putrid smell of war and destruction. He, too, heard the arguing and

the cynicism. But the poet kept glancing upward. And every time he would do it, the poet's face would begin to shine, as if from the inside out. Then the poet spoke. It was at first almost a whisper, "Arise, shine, for your light has come." The exiles ignored him. They shuffled around, feeling scared and sorry for themselves. As quickly as their hopes had shot up about their future, just as quickly hopes had faded again.

But the poet would not be ignored. "Arise, shine, for your light has come," The exiles began to get annoyed. "Look around," a young woman shouted. "Do you see light? Do you see hope? No, you see darkness and destruction. Open your eyes mister."

But the poet would not be silenced. "Arise, shine, for your light has come. The glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Yes, darkness has covered the earth. Thick darkness has covered the people, but God has not finished. The Lord will arise upon you. God's glory will appear over you. Can you see it yet?" The exiles began to gather around the poet, watching him like one watches a madman, with a mixture of fear and curiosity. He became even more animated. "Arise, shine, for your light has come. Lift your eyes from the wreckage. Look around. They will come back, your children, God's children, from far away. The crews will rebuild. Job loss will open up new dreams. People will stop pointing guns and start reaching out. Church battles will be a thing of the past. God's homecoming is about to be underway."

Children began to inch closer to the poet. These children with eyes that had seen death too many times. These children with hearts that had broken too many times. These children who were growing up learning how to watch for rocket fire or how to listen for the shrill sound of a dropping bomb. These children whose spirits were at risk of being submerged into hate and cynicism forever. These children came and sat at the poet's feet and listened to him speak.

"Arise, shine, for your light has come. There will be a time in this place, in this land, in this world, when Peace is the overseer and Righteousness the task master. Arise, shine, for your light has come." The poet looked into each little face as he spoke. "There will be a time in this place, in this land, in this world, when Violence shall no longer have a place at the table. Devastation and destruction will no longer take root within your borders. Your walls will be called Salvation and your gates, Praise. Arise, shine, for your light has come."

And as the prophetic poet painted this divine vision of newness and life, the children's own faces began to shine as if from the inside out with imagination and possibility. As the poet spoke God's sure promise of newness and life, the children became happier and livelier. Soon, their marvelous laughter rang out across the burned-out shell of the city. "Arise, shine," they sang. "Arise and shine. Our light has come," they declared. The children and the poet joined voices and sang the song of newness. "Arise and shine. Arise and shine. Arise and shine."

Soon, their mothers and fathers could not resist and joined their voices in the musical protest, in the melody of prophetic poetry. Together, in the middle of the destruction and

chaos, they sang and sang and sang themselves back into faith. They sang and sang and sang until tears streamed down their faces and they all began to shine as if from the inside out. Somehow, God was going to bring peace and comfort. They did not know when and they did not know how, but they knew with certainty that God would fulfill God's promises of restoration and homecoming. "Arise and shine, for our light has come."

Centuries later, the Persian astrologers, or magi, slowly followed the bright star. According to their pagan beliefs, a star that bright could mean only one thing—the birth of a new king. They first traveled to Jerusalem, the Jewish people's capital city and King Herod's home. The magi thought surely Herod would tell them about this new king. After all, people cannot have two kings. So if another king had been born, then Herod must be on his way out. But although Herod had tried desperately to be smooth about it, he clearly did not know what they were talking about.

Herod's clergy, however, had been helpful. They had remembered a few verses from the minor prophet Micah. The verses stated that Israel's king was going to be born in the small village of Bethlehem. When the magi heard this tidbit, they hurriedly packed up their belongings and began to follow the star south out of Jerusalem. As matter of fact, they could not get out of Herod's palace quick enough. Something was awfully fishy about that King Herod. The air around him reeked with the putrid smell of war and destruction.

In Bethlehem, the star stopped over a small one-room home. The magi were surprised. It was not what they had expected when they began their journey. Compared to King Herod's palace, this place was just plain pitiful. If it had not been for the star, they would not have stopped there. They looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, opened the door and went inside. It was so small. The magi bumped their turbans on the rafters and snagged their robes on the rough furnitureⁱⁱ.

Then it happened. They caught their first glimpse. The baby boy's eyes stared back at them. These grown men were overwhelmed with a sense of joy, and hope, and courage, and home, all at once. They fell to their knees as if blinded by a great light and tears streamed down their faces. "Oh my goodness," they thought. "This baby is the one, whoever that is. We've been waiting for this baby king our whole lives. We had no idea."

The baby's parents watched the magi carefully, with a mixture of fear and curiosity. Mary held Jesus a little tighter to her chest, not quite sure what these strangers wanted with **her** baby boy. When the magi saw the concern written on her face, they all started to smile. They must have looked like such giddy fools! Their faces began to shine from the inside out. The magi joined hands, encircling Mary and the baby, and began to sing. They sang and sang and sang until even Joseph could not resist and joined in the fun, along with some shepherds who were still hanging around. They sang and sang and sang themselves back into faith, back into hope, back into promise.

Tears streamed down their faces and they knew with certainty that with his life, this baby king would heal all the brokenness they saw each and every day. Somehow, and they did not understand how, this baby king was promise fulfilled. It seemed so strange to them and they did not really understand what was happening.

But that day in that small house, everyone felt the light penetrating the darkness and the darkness losing its power. They felt a kind of restoration they had never felt before. Even though they were in a strange land, they felt at home. They felt filled to the brim with hope and promise. And the magi left the next morning singing to each other, singing to anyone and everyone who would listen, “Arise, shine, for our light has come!”

Centuries later, more wars rage. More towers have fallen. More financial markets have spiraled downwards. Violence seems to still have a place at our table. Destruction and devastation still try and take root in our borders. The walls built between countries and in territories do not speak of salvation and their gates are not forms of praise. Children’s eyes still see too much and their hearts still break. Some children are still learning how to listen for bombs and rockets. Some children still have their spirits submerged into hate and cynicism.

And these children are waiting for the voice of the poet. They are waiting for the voice of a people who will take Isaiah’s words, who will take the epiphany of the magi, who will take the song of faith and hope and promise and Emmanuel and sing it out into the world. They are waiting for the voice of a people, of a church, who will lay down their own words of hate and argument and apathy and take up the poetry of God’s promised restoration and Jesus’ coming into this world.

I mean— just imagine if the chorus of Arise and Shine started to sound from ocean to ocean, from Gaza to Jerusalem, from Iraq to Afghanistan, from inner-city Detroit to N. O’Connor Road in Irving. “Arise and shine. Arise and shine. Arise and shine.” Singing ourselves back into faith and hope and promise fulfilled. Singing this world back into new life and Christmas stars and Easter’s empty tomb. And all faces shining as if from the inside out. Everyone at home. And all children free to laugh.

We have a song to sing, my friends. We have a song to sing. We are called to be the poet. May it be so.

ⁱ Brueggemann, Walter. “Off By Nine Miles,” The Christian Century, December 19-26, 2001. Page 15.

ⁱⁱ Taylor, Barbara Brown. Home By Another Way.