

“The Struggle for Light”

January 9, 2022

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

We're celebrating Epiphany today even though it's a little past that day. Epiphany falls on January 6th every year, it doesn't move around the calendar. The next time it falls on a Sunday is 2027, I think. Epiphany marks the end of Christmas, the twelfth day. And it highlights a theme in scripture that can otherwise be overlooked. We heard it in the words from Isaiah: “Arise! Shine! For your light has come!” Several religions have celebrations for the coming of light this time of year: Hannukah in Judaism and Diwali in Hinduism are two of them. And, like Epiphany, these traditions tie the coming of physical light in the world to spiritual awakening.

Unfortunately, in our country the day of Epiphany, January 6th, has also taken on new meaning since the insurrection last year at our nation's Capitol Building. In watching the footage from that day this past week, I was reminded just how hard it is for light to enter the world when there is so much darkness to overcome. In his speech from Statuary Hall in the Rotunda, President Biden quoted the gospel of John, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Truth is a form of light that can dispel the darkness of confusion and deception. It is light that is struggling to be seen in our society right now.

That struggle for light I think lies at the heart of Isaiah words. If you read other parts of Isaiah you'll find several references to the need for light. One we often hear on Christmas Eve is from chapter 9: “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.” Have you ever wondered why that theme is repeated so much in the Bible? In scripture when you find something emphasized over and over it's usually because that element is missing in the lives of the people being written. Isaiah talks about the need for light so much because there's a lot of darkness in his world.

There's a lot of darkness in our world, too. What happened in Washington a year ago may have been an extreme example, but it was one of many that continue to plague us, to threaten the arrival of light. In addition to the deep political divisions among us, we also have economic and social inequities to face. As we've learned over the last two years, a lack of access to healthcare for Native Americans and people of color have caused much higher proportions of illness and death from covid than is consistent with their numbers in the population. Meanwhile the effects of climate change on poorer countries leads to more frequent cycles of droughts and flooding causing devastating crop failures and widespread hunger. Add to that the human-made disasters of war and ethnic violence, poverty and political repression and the darkness can be overwhelming.

Light must always struggle against darkness. Even in Matthew's gospel where we find the story of Epiphany we learn, in spite of the homage the Magi bring, darkness remains. Right after this story that ends with such joy, the small family is forced to flee to another country to

escape the wrath of Herod who will meet the child's birth with violence, light with darkness. The struggle is always with us.

And that may be the most important thing for us to learn from Epiphany. Like so much in scripture it's not just a "one and done" kind of event. Jesus' arrival represents the birth of light into a world of darkness, and it must be born over and over again. Darkness will never go away so we must always struggle for light.

What I love so much about Isaiah's words is their insistence that the people arise and shine. It's up to them. God will not magically create a world where there is no darkness. It's their job to become the world's light by overcoming the darkness around them and within them. During the civil rights struggle in this country Martin Luther King and his colleagues spent days working with volunteers, training them before going out on a march. They needed to be taught how to be light in the darkness they would face. They trained them in nonviolent resistance, much like Gandhi did for the people of India during their demonstrations. They had to learn how to resist the temptation to fall into darkness by meeting violence with violence. It wasn't easy and not everyone agreed with it. But King was right when he said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.."

Last month the great Bishop Desmond Tutu died at the age of 90. Recently I was listening to his interviews with Terry Gross on Fresh Air that were replayed after his death. After Apartheid was dismantled in South Africa, President Nelson Mandela appointed Tutu to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would go around the country to hear the stories from people about the extent of human rights abuses that had been committed under Apartheid. It was a crucial exercise in the struggle for light. There could never be healing in South Africa without a full accounting, or as full an accounting as possible, of what the Black and mixed-race population endured. It was painful to go through, and I'm sure there were many who resisted it on both sides. Tutu dubbed the commission the "Kleenex Commission" because there were so many tears involved, even from Tutu himself, at hearing these painful stories. But he was convinced it was the only path if light was ever to emerge.

We will always struggle for light if we're truly committed to its presence in the world. If we want to eradicate poverty in this country, we will have to struggle with the realities of poverty to drive out its darkness. If we want to dismantle structural racism in our country, we must hear the stories of those who have suffered because of it. We have to bring the truth of their experience to light, and that will be a struggle. If our hope is to arise and shine, to become the beacon of hope our world needs as described in Isaiah, then we must be part of the struggle. We must make the long, arduous journey from faraway places to find our way to where light is born. The work is ours to do and the light is ours to reveal if we have the courage to become the people God longs us to be. That's what Epiphany is all about. It's about the work we must do in the struggle for light in the world. May we engage that struggle today and every day as we overcome the darkness with God's light.

Amen