

Macalester Plymouth

UNITED CHURCH

“Be Radiant”

By Rev. Adam Blons

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Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6

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 God’s 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 on 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. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house. Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the LORD your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because God has glorified you.

May these words be to us our light and our life. Thanks be to God.

These words from the prophet Isaiah greeted a people weary and worn from living in exile. After what seemed like an endless time away from home living in Babylon, away from the things they knew, the things they loved, the familiar landscapes and rhythms, without the simple things like the freedom to gather, to worship, to feast, to sing, their return had begun. Things were finally looking up for the Judeans who were returning to rebuild their life in Judea. These words came to dispirited readers, who knew only that things were changing, not how or when or what the new normal would be like.

Does this sound at all familiar?

At times, we talked about 2020 as a kind of exile. Though most of us have not been forced to leave our homes, the landscape of our lives this year looked and felt unfamiliar. We lived in endless uncertainty. Our world got suddenly smaller and narrowed to what we could navigate from home. Our screens gave us our only windows to the wider world. Miraculously, through what sometimes felt to me like a kind of outer body experience, we were transported into the living rooms of friends, family, Alicia Keys, Jimmy Fallon, Mo Willems, and Roger Goodell. We found ways to connect and yet there was so much isolation from the things we knew, the things we loved. Though we start the new year still in exile, there are signs of a return somewhere ahead.

To those who walked in the darkness of exile, Isaiah says, “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” Isaiah means to inspire God’s people to rise up out of the despair of exile to begin rebuilding their life. There is such hope in the images: the return of sons and daughters from long separation, the return of a sense of abundance after tremendous scarcity, and the joy of seeing and being seen by those around you after feeling cut off. These are some of our hopes for 2021, too. With the promise of vaccines, we don’t know how long it will be, but can see a day when parents are reunited with sons and daughters, when things become easier, and we can be together as audiences, communities and a congregation.

Isaiah sees the return from exile as God lifting the people up and names it. “Arise! The glory of the Lord has risen. Lift up your eyes.” These words and this passage from Isaiah remind me to look up, to see beyond our exile, to trust that even now our return from it has begun, and God’s radiant presence is guiding us.

Most of us got through 2020 by keeping our heads down, doing what we could, pushing through, caring for our neighbors, working hard, shuffling along, getting by. Facing so much uncertainty, without a roadmap through the year and survival as our main focus, there is no looking ahead. All we could do was put one foot in front of the other and look for the path as it appeared right in front of us.

Blizzards, like the one we had just before Christmas, remind me of riding in the car as a child during a blizzard. We were living in Rochester at the time and driving up to the Twin Cities for one of my parents' friend's birthday party. Visibility was zero. You couldn't see a bridge until you were right under it. There were 6 inches of snow on the roads and the plows couldn't keep up. The only thing we could see was the vague outline of the car ahead of us and a small strip of road partly cleared by their tires. It was super slick so we put one tire on that small strip and the other tire on the shoulder hoping for better traction. We crept along at 20 miles per hour turning a one-hour trip into a three-hour ordeal. We probably should have stayed at home, but eventually arrived safely to our destination. I was exhausted after one of the scariest car rides of my life and slept through most of the party. In times of uncertainty, when you can't see where you are going, you can only feel your way forward and take one careful step at a time. Progress is slowed. Visions and dreams give way to simple day to day, minute by minute, coping. Faced with huge important issues like racial justice and protecting our democracy this past year, we did what we could, what was immediate, what we could put our hands-on like reading books, sending postcards, giving money and maybe some stress baking to cope with it all. After a year of keeping our heads down, things are looking up for 2021. Arise! Lift up your eyes. Be radiant.

This Sunday is Epiphany when we typically talk about the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus. It is a great little moment in the Gospel of Matthew's nativity when they arrive with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They are amazed by the promise of this child. After their visit, they sneak out of town to avoid telling the murderous King Herod about him. What seemed threatening to Herod was life-saving for Jesus' followers. In Jesus, they saw the embodiment of Isaiah's hope—the promise of a whole and healed world. In both passages gifts of gold and frankincense are mentioned as signs of this promise. There is an abundance of light in both passages. In Christ, we see the light has come. His birth reminds

us that God is radically with us, and the return has begun. He inspires us to rise up, lift up our eyes to see new possibilities, and to be radiant.

There will be no shortage of hope as the promise of vaccines becomes the reality of reduced infections and boosted herd immunity. But the world will need light and love to bring healing and a real reordering of our lives after this crisis. So, arise, shine, lift up your eyes, be radiant and see what God is doing in 2021. Amen.