

Arise! Shine!

What is your least favorite way of being awakened in the morning? Your alarm clock? Your spouse's alarm clock? Someone's car alarm going off? The phone ringing? How about this: "Tommy [or whatever your first name is], time to get up! It's time for school!" Ughh! Or how about these words: "Arise! Shine!" Do I have to? I don't feel like it!

Now, what is your favorite way of waking up? A gentle back rub? The smell of coffee? The sounds of birds singing? How about this: "Tommy [or whatever your name is]! There's no school! It's a snow day!" Or how about these words: "Arise! Shine!" Yippee! I'm excited!

We might say that the prophet Isaiah was awakening the people of Israel with these very words. Awakening them not so much from sleep as from what Isaiah calls "thick darkness."

Isn't that a vivid description? You can almost feel it! It's the kind of darkness where you can't see a thing. Like a thick fog on a moonless night. Like a deep cave or hole where no sunlight can penetrate. Have you ever experienced darkness like that ([either literally or figuratively, and whether personally or corporately])? Are you living in a time of darkness now? Are we?

In today's verses Isaiah doesn't specify the nature of the darkness he was referring to. But listen to these words from the preceding chapter (Isaiah 59:9-11):

Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead. We all growl like bears; like doves we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.

The thick darkness Isaiah is describing here is clearly corporate. And in part at least, political, particularly the references to justice, or the lack thereof. It sounds like there is a crisis of leadership. In Isaiah's time, justice was supposed to be the responsibility of the king. Where there was no justice, there was often no king. Or I should say, no good king. In our time justice is at least partly the responsibility of the president. What do you think: are we having a crisis of leadership?

Before we lose ourselves in political finger pointing, listen to these verses that come immediately after the ones I just read. (Isaiah 59:12-14).

For our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the Lord, and turning away from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart. Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter.

Clearly there is also a crisis of faithfulness. And not just on the part of the leaders, but on the part of the people. A people who had denied their Lord, and had quit following their God.

This is the context, then, for this morning's verses. Allow me to re-read chapter 60, verses 1-3.

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 his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

What is going on here? Is there a new leader in town—a new king or president? One who is making justice a priority? Or, is there a new commitment to faithfulness on the part of the people? To put my question differently, what, or who, is doing the shining in these verses?

On the one hand, Isaiah is telling his people, “your light has come.” And it sounds very much like he’s talking about a new leader or teaching of some sort, a new king or president, a new Messiah or Savior, a new law or commandment. And this new leader or teaching is the source of the light that has risen upon them.

On the other hand, Isaiah tells them to “Arise, shine.” Wake up! Get out of bed! Because we’re the ones who are supposed to be doing the shining. It’s our light and our brightness that nations and kings shall come to.

In recent weeks we’ve been celebrating the new leader that has come to town. And I’m not talking about president-elect Donald Trump. I’m talking about Jesus Christ. Our risen Lord. Our infant king, born anew every year about this time. And with our new leader comes a new teaching. Which is actually a very ancient teaching, which we can sum up with one word. Any guesses? Love.

What we learn from our new leader Jesus is that while love may be the light, and God may be the source of this light, it is our job to shine that light for all to see. Or to quote one of this morning’s hymns, it is our job to be the “brightest and best of the stars of the morning.” And if we shine our light brightly enough, nations and kings shall come to it. Maybe even president-elect Donald Trump.

You may not always feel like it. But arise! Shine! I know of no better words to wake up to!

Amen!

Questions for Pondering and Discussion

- 1) How do we understand justice?
- 2) In what ways is justice lacking in our country?
- 3) Who is responsible for justice in our country? The president? Congress? The court system?
- 4) What is the relationship between our transgressions and the lack of justice?
- 5) Does the new/ancient law of love work, or is it too simplistic? What might it look like? (Song: “Well It’s a New Day”)
- 6) Re-read Isaiah 60:1: “*Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*” Who or what is doing the shining here?
- 7) What is the relationship between the various parts of participants in this verse?
- 8) Re-read Isaiah 60:3: “*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*” What might this mean for us?
- 9) What might this mean for our nation?
- 10) What might this mean for our church?