

Imagine what it would be like to have been forced from your homes for political reasons, then being separated from loved ones, ultimately finding yourself working a job well below your pay grade, and to add insult to injury you are treated with disdain by the government and the people who adopted you because you do not have a good grasp of the language or local customs. That is the life of exiles and refugees worldwide. That was the life of the Israelites who were forced marched from their homes to Babylon. The exiles lived under a dark cloud, a shroud of despair.

For the Babylonian exiles you might think the idea of returning home would have been like receiving a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But going home was just as traumatic as when they left it. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The wall was gone. The temple was a pile of rubble. And those who stayed behind had done little to reclaim the once great city, as they too struggled to survive. Picking up the pieces and beginning again was hard work and had to have been torturous to the soul. The cloud still hung over them. Where is the light that will return the people and the nation to its full glory?

When we think of light we think of hope, as in seeing the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. But without darkness we do not necessarily know what light is and without light we do not fully grasp the depth of the darkness around us. Light and darkness, while they are mutually exclusive, they both can be overwhelming. When we lived in Minnesota, I was always amazed at how fast the sky would change. It would be bright blue and shimmering with light to the point that it hurt your eyes. And in the distance, moving quickly would come an ominous wall of darkness. It was as if the night sky descended upon you in the blink of an eye. We would end up covered in a shroud woven with lightening and thunder, rain and hail, and tornadoes. There were times when it seemed like it would never end. And there was always concern that things would end badly. And if things did end in disarray, even if sun shined once again, it felt like the cloud still enveloped the world as folks attempted to pick up the shattered pieces of their lives.

Granted tornadoes are not part of the California experience. But the cloud of despair is equally relevant for those who have found themselves cloaked in smoke from fires, or digging through the rubble in the aftershocks of an

earthquake. The cloud of despair also impacts those who struggle to find a way forward due to loss, health issues, conflict, societal pressures, politics, finances, the demands of everyday life, and for some, fear for their safety and the safety of their families. There are times when hiding in the darkness seems a more prudent course of action than venturing into the light of day. And there are times when we do all we can to hold onto the flicker of light, the hope, that seems so distant.

And that flicker of light can come to us in many ways. Some of you may have seen the article in the Los Angeles Times about Letty Bierschenk and her seventeen year old granddaughter Jessica.¹ At the age of 90 Letty lost her home in Bell Canyon due to the Woolsey Fire that had engulfed the Malibu area. When it was safe to go back to the property, young Jessica returned to search through the rubble for any metal or glass, anything that was recognizable. She found an old saw, bent from the flames, the spring from a grandfather clock and more. She collected what she could and welded together a phoenix, a bird that rises from the ashes. (on screen) And while it may not be a thing of beauty to us, for Letty this sculpture is her light, her hope to rebuild, rather than give in to despair.

The Israelites were hoping to rebuild. They were set on rebuilding themselves into a great nation. Isaiah talks about the nations coming to Zion, bringing animals and wealth beyond comprehension. As most of us read these words we think, Israel will become so important, such a power center, that the nations of the world will flock to her. And yet, this is a prophecy that has yet to be fulfilled. We have to wonder, why?

Maybe because as we read this prophecy we think the rebuilding of Zion is something that happens because of the actions of the people alone. So maybe we need to read Isaiah's words in a different way. Who is actually being glorified by the nations? Whose glory is revealed in the rebuilding of Zion?

As is so often the case with scripture, we need to get our human desires out of the way in order to fully appreciate God's work in the world. We

¹ Los Angeles Times, "A grandmother lost everything in the Woolsey Fire. Her granddaughter created art from the ruins," Hannah Fry, 27 December 2018, accessed online 29 December 2018 @ <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-woolsey-fire-sculpture-20181227-story.html>

need to let go of our egos and our desire for power and control. For it is not the people's glory that is to be celebrated but God's glory. For, as Isaiah makes clear, it is God's glory that has dawned and shone upon the people² and the nations will come bringing gifts heralding the glories of the Lord.³

Maybe we need to be thinking about glory not in terms of fame, fortune and power, but glory in the sense of living in a way that we radiate God's light. We become beacons of light, hope for those who live enveloped by a cloud of darkness. Isaiah is actually very specific about what we are to do so that we radiate God's light.

First we are told to look up – to rise up. When we focus on looking downward or only at what is behind us, we are not able to envision a good today let alone imagine a better future. In looking up, we accept the light God has shone upon us and so become a reflection of hope to the people in our community, in our country and to the nations of the world.

We also learn that God is working to build community, drawing us in unity to the light. And so our sons and daughters will gather together. They will flow together and be as a river of light. For gathered together we are better able to glow⁴ in God's light both within the community of faith and within the greater community. For without God in our lives, communities eventually shatter. We get lost in the ways of the world, lost in the greed, desires and idols of our hearts, consumed by fear of losing what we have. And so it becomes easy for us to be weighed down by the darkness of everyday life.

So as reflections of God's light we are, as a community of faith, able to look out into the world and see where God is working in the world today and where we are called to be in ministry. As Professor Charles Aaron commented on these verses, "However strong the darkness, we can take heart. However powerful the rest of the world seems, God has chosen to work through the church, through our missions. When we recognize the

² Isaiah 60:1

³ Isaiah 60:6

⁴ Isaiah 60:5

needs of the world, the glory of God, we can arise out of any stupor and engage in our ministry.”⁵

Regardless of how good our work is, we will not be drawing the riches of the nations to the church. And just like the Israelites returning to Jerusalem, we will find our work of building and rebuilding and bearing the torch of hope will not be easy. But that is our calling. To be here not to make those of us who sit in the pews feel good, but to feel good because we are helping others find the light that is needed to move forward in this world. We are called to be the builders of paths of reconciliation and compassion. With faith and truth shared in love we are able to help others find meaning and purpose in a world that emphasizes consumerism, me-ism, misogyny, and xenophobia. We are called to be a light, so those that are in need of refuge may find a safe place to call home.

A Korean folktale tells of the power of light over darkness. Each day as the sun crossed the sky the cave would shudder at the sun’s brightness. But the cave was proud. It was proud of the darkness it held within. So the cave set out to invite the sun to come visit, to experience the wonders of the darkness. And each day the sun refused. But the cave persisted. Eventually the sun relented and agreed to come into the cave.

Cave cleaned and swept, wanting to make an extra special impression on the sun. But when the agreed upon time for the sun’s visit came, cave was horrified. For as the rays of the sun entered the cave, cave’s treasured darkness went away. And so we recall the words from John’s Gospel, “For the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”⁶ The light that has come into the world is a light that cannot be put out. Regardless of how hard the Herods of the world try, God’s light cannot be put out.

And so in the darkness of our world, when the dark clouds of life surround us, we are called to follow the light, so that we bear witness to the power of God’s light, so we bring hope into a hurting world. Amen

⁵ Working Preacher, “Commentary on Isaiah 60:1-6: January 6, 2019,” Charles L. Aaron, Jr., accessed online 28 December 2018 @ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3941

⁶ John 1:5