**SERMON Isaiah 60:1-6 & Ephesians 3:12**

Let’s bow our heads to pray together before we examine these passages more closely, let’s pray:

Lord God, as we collectively open the words of scripture to consider again how the coming of Emmanuel impacts our lives today, I pray that our hearts will be open and receptive. Help me to speak your word with faithfulness, with clarity, wisdom and humility, so that together the body of the church can be encouraged and built up to do the work of multiplying Kin-dom things, good and joyous things in 2020 and work tirelessly to divide the pain and suffering of those we encounter. Amen.

It is impossible to ignore the events that shape and our shaping our current moment in history. The desperation of people and animals fleeing from the biggest wildfires Australia has ever seen. The fear and frustration of being on what seems like the brink of yet another war in the Middle East. The rise in horrific anti-Semitic attacks, like the savage machete attack during Hanukkah at a rabbi’s home in upstate New York just over a week ago. The continuing pro-Democracy protests in Hong Kong. I could go on and on. But I feel myself wondering…after the decorations are packed away for another year, and the holidays draw to a close. **How can this ancient story, about the birth of a baby, really matter a-midst these overwhelming, and global stories of today?**

As we consider our lectionary passages for today, as well as this idea of *multiplying joy and dividing pain* in this day, at the beginning of a new year I want to share some context that is crucial for getting a good grip on what we read from in Isaiah 60:1-6. Isaiah lived in Jerusalem in the latter half of Israel’s kingdom period and he spoke on God’s behalf to the leaders of Jerusalem and Judah. He spoke **first** of a message of God’s judgment; warning Israel’s corrupt leaders that their rebellion against their covenant with God would come at a cost. That God was going to use the great empires of Assyria and after them Babylon to judge Jerusalem if they persisted in idolatry and oppression of the poor. BUT that announcement was combined with a **second** message, a *message of hope*.

Isaiah believed deeply that God would one day fulfill all of his covenant promises:

* that God would send a king from David’s line to establish God’s kingdom (2 Sam 7),
* that God would lead Israel in obedience to all the laws of the Covenant made at Mt Sinai (Ex 19), and all of this was so…
* that God’s blessing and salvation would flow outward to all the nations like God promised to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12,

… and it’s this hope that compelled Isaiah to speak out against the corruption and idolatry of Israel in his day. Our passage from later in the book of Isaiah, was likely written after the historical Isaiah had died, and just when the return from exile began. The Babylonian exile, understandably, caused some of the people of Israel to doubt and lose faith in God. Those returning to Jerusalem expected a glorious restoration but instead found themselves frustrated by innumerable hardships. Maybe you can identify with the doubts and feelings of hopelessness that come from seeing and experiencing the despair that comes with pain and suffering? The barrage of the images and sound bites from each day’s new disaster is honestly enough for even the Godliest, the most faithful Christian to ask some serious questions about what or who is really in control.

The prophetic words from the Old Testament emerge out of similarly desperate circumstances, when the very people that God had made a special covenant with, were questioning and doubting that their God, YHWH, could really make a difference in a world where all they could see was destruction. No temple, no cities, no leaders. And it is in very context, the prophet reaffirms God’s promises of hope for a new Jerusalem. A city which belongs to an entirely new creation. A creation were death and suffering are gone forever. This is the Kin-dom of God that will be the place from which God’s justice and mercy flow out to all the nations of the world. The prophetic words of Isaiah are to remind the people of God that YHWH is the true God of history. That the glory of God breaks into history like a thunderbolt, bringing with it light and salvation.

God’s glory in the Hebrew scripture is always **God’s presence**. The glory of the Lord appears:

* in the wilderness when the people complain about lacking food and God promises manna;
* when the Arc of the Covenant is completed, the glory of the Lord descends and fills it so that even Moses could not enter it;
* when Moses asks to see God’s glory, God responds, “You cannot see my face”;

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures **God’s presence**, God’s very own face, is designated by glory. And this glory and light arises among the people, it is the Lord who arises among them, and now *their* job, their calling and purpose to be a *light* to all the nations and show the whole world who YHWH really is because the temple sanctuary in Isaiah chapter 6 can no longer contain, it is the glory of God that must burst beyond even the nation of Israel. **The presence of God expands outwards toward the whole cosmos.** And for us, in this day, that matters to me. It matters to me that when images of sadness, despair and pain overwhelm our screens and our families, to remember that God hasn’t abandoned us, instead God’s presence is here, and is – as we retell in the Christmas story each year – *‘God-with-us.’*

You know when I was reading over the first 4 verses of this chapter of Isaiah and contemplating on how *light* as theme is used as a way of imagining God’s glory, a couple of stories about light came to mind. I grew up in rural Ireland, with no cities or large towns for 20 miles in any direction, the light coming from the moon and stars was intense. And the mottled colors of the long arching sweep of the Milky Way was always visible on a clear night. I’m fortunate now to live in the middle of Hoosier National Forest close to Curby, where the Louisville Astronomical Society has many of their telescopes because light pollution is so low. The visibility of the night sky is breathtaking.

I remember the first time I went caving, potholing and spelunking as a middle schooler and our group leader had a dozen of us sit quietly in a broad limestone cavern and turn off our headlamps to experience the disorienting feeling of absolute darkness. Before lighting a small candle to demonstrate the conditions Victorian underground explorers would have moved about the darkness in. I remember the relief I felt after he struck his tiny match and the flare lit up our small part of the cave.

But all these images really don’t do justice to the impact that the *light* has in this passage. Honestly, what seems to relate more for me is my experience of “Coming Out,” and of understanding my own sexuality in a new way, which allowed me to see and understanding past events, circumstances and relationships differently, and in a way that made more sense.

*Light* in this instance, is about seeing for the first time or seeing something more clearly. Just like when you look at a distant object with a telescope or binoculars, and you adjust the focus so that you can clearly see – the bird, the horizon, the far-off mountain ridge or island. Or you finally break and go to the eye doctor and get reexamined for eye glasses and on the drive home you realize how much detail you have been missing in the trees, in the buildings and on road signs! And, after been given this opportunity for a new perspective, and given new clarity of vision, it’s also impossible to go back to seeing things the old… dark, fuzzy, indistinct way, it just doesn’t make sense after the light.

This light is God’s epiphany, God’s self-revelation: “the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.” Yes, **the presence of God is expansive,** but it also is **revelatory**, God’s presence in this world reveals something of God, that was up until this point hidden, unknown. At the beginning of Ephesians 3 we read about Paul’s mission. He understands that his God-assignment was to enlighten all people concerning God’s once mysterious plan. This is not a new plan, but a plan which was from before creation, and God’s appearance in the flesh was to unite all people, from all nations, **in the name of Christ**. The birth of Jesus Christ made God visible. The presence of God that fills the whole cosmos, became flesh. The universal made particular. And in become particular, the Creator of the Universe experiences first-hand what it is like to be subject to all the pains of humanity, and yet lives a life devoted to healing, forgiveness and love.

Here’s the thing that we need to reckon with today, as people who have just celebrated the birth of Jesus, is that the work of Christmas is just beginning…AGAIN. Our purpose, our God-assignment in 2020, as the world’s craziness and pain swirls around us is to **make the glory of God’s presence known** AGAIN**,** and by **increasing God’s visibility**, revealing the things of God that seem to be hidden un.

Let’s go back to the quote written out in the bulletin “The Opening Thought for Meditation” which says: “The place where God calls **you to** is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” That intersection of our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger, marks - for Buechner - the place or purpose that God is calling you to. That calling might look different for each person here, the thing that sparks deep gladness in you may not be the same thing for me, but I want to hazard a guess, and say that:

In a world that is deeply hungry for love, your God-assignment is to…

* increase the presence and visibility of love.

In a world that is deeply hungry for justice, your God-assignment is to…

* increase the presence and visibility of mercy

In a world where people are deeply hungry for belonging and value,

 your God-assignment is to…

* multiply equality and inclusion.

And, what happens when we participate in making these good things more visible? Well, we effectively multiply all the things that belong to God’s new creation…so…let me challenge you to think about…

* what more love would look like in our schools, workplaces, homes, cities and statehouses?
* what would more hope look like in our juvenile detention centers, county jails and state prisons?
* what would more peace look like for those in treatment centers and recovery programs, in hospital ICUs, oncology units and hospice care?
* what would more joy look like for those drowning in debt, threatened by foreclosure, eviction or repossession?

Discerning this higher purpose that God has created you for, this God-assignment as I’ve called it, involves both a look inward and a look outward. This series may be a great time to begin the journey of discovery by asking yourself 2 questions. This first is: **what brings me deep gladness?** The key to discerning ‘your deep gladness’ is LISTENING. Pay attention to your life. The exciting peaks as well as in the deep, dark valleys. Even perhaps, in the monotony. Pay attention to those moments, because they are telling you something important about yourself. Even more, such moments are whispering something about the kind of work God has given *you life* to do. **This** is what needs multiplying, if the hunger of this world is to be addressed.

After looking inward, we must then look outward. We must look at the world in its most honest moments, at the nightly news (with the sound turned off), at the world in all its pain and anguish and deep hunger and ask the second question: **how can my deep gladness touch this?**

I’d like to close the message today with a litany composed by Howard Thurman that often reappears at this time of year. Thurman as many of you probably know was a mystical, prophetic preacher active in the civil rights movement and this is his poem “The Work of Christmas.”

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and the princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among [siblings] ~~brothers~~,

To make music in the heart.