

Global Good: For the Sake of the Dark

*A sermon preached on Isaiah 60:1-6 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on January 5, 2020*

I.

If you've spent any time on really any social media outlet over the last month or so, you likely have noticed the trends of reflection prompted naturally by the end of the year, but supercharged as we end the 2010s and enter the 2020s. Some posts flattened a decade of life into a series of milestones and changes that evolved in those years were everywhere — “in the past 10 years, I've ... traveled the world, gotten married, had a kid, lost 60 pounds, written a book, buried a beloved one, gotten tenure, vanquished cancer, run a half dozen marathons.” But others reflected in images, posting side-by-side photos of themselves a decade apart — one in 2010, one now — showing a physical transformation that time and their energies had brought. Several of these that I saw included the hashtag #glowup.

This internet slang term #glowup, as I've learned, refers for some people to a growth in confidence in one's appearance, style, or identity over time, kind of a “before and after”-type transformation as one grows up and, it seems, glows up too.¹ (Several posts I saw laughingly called their decade-long transformation a #glowdown!) I confess, I've found myself intrigued by this turn of phrase and what it represents. But I wonder about this trend — what happens in all the minutes between before and after to lead to such a transformation? What happens below the surface? What is the invitation extended in such a reflection? What's the source of the transformation?

¹ Thanks to the always-reliable Urban Dictionary for helping a girl out on the internet: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=glow+up>.

II.

We step back into the stream we've been following during Advent through the eyes of the prophet Isaiah. Throughout the weeks in waiting for the coming Christ child, you remember the words of Isaiah that aided in that preparation – words of comfort to a weary exiled community, words of promise of a messiah to come and set things right, words of leadership about how this king would live in the world, words of hope for a peaceable kingdom, instruments of war turned into tools for life, and today, words of encouragement to a weary people in the aftermath of exile.

“Arise, shine,” Isaiah says, “for your light is come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” These words must have surged with energy to a people who walked in darkness. Their 70-year forced exile to Babylon had left Jerusalem bereft of so much that makes for flourishing. A community robbed of people and all the energy they pour into a particular place. Resources of money, property, and intellect taken from a city. The temple reduced to ruin. For when the Israelites began their return – of which Isaiah said would be accompanied by the abundance of the sea, the wealth of the nations, the tender care of sons and daughters – they wouldn't return to the home they left. Things have changed. Loss and disorientation and darkness were surely thick.²

“But the Lord will arise upon you,” Isaiah rejoices, “and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” In a beautiful translation of this text, the Jewish Study Bible

² Joanna Harader's *Living by the Word* article this week gave me lots of food for thought about what such a return might look and feel like to the Israelites: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-12/january-3-epiphany-sunday>

renders what we read in our NRSV translation as “then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice” to “as you behold, you will glow; your heart will throb and thrill.”³

As I studied this text for today, I loved learning from biblical scholars who point out that the passage’s opening claim — “Arise, shine, for your light has come!” — is one that is “wondrously and deliberately ambiguous.”⁴ On the one hand, the phrase “your light” refers to Yahweh, the Lord, Israel’s only hope for a future. On the other hand, “your light” is also referencing Israel’s own “glow,” the radiance that emanates from one firmly in another’s light, a glow in this situation that transforms Israel. Thus, as one scholar says, “‘your light’ is both *intrusion from Yahweh* and *restored Israel*.”⁵

Into devastation, hope. Into ending, beginning. Into things as they are, a revealing, an epiphany of things as they shall become. Into darkness, light.

And that light? God, its source. (*Arise, shine, for God’s light has come!*) Christ, its bearer. (*Arise, shine, for God’s light in Jesus has come!*) All of us — the world God so loved, God’s beloved children, you and me, its glow. (*You people arise, shine, for God’s Light within you — your light has come!*)

III.

Together with the story of the magi who followed a star to Bethlehem, these stories of Epiphany reveal to us how God reveals Godself to us, right? For in Emmanuel, God is with us! Christ is born! God is doing a new thing in our midst! And that new thing appeared first to the unlikeliest of people, in the

³ *The Jewish Study Bible*, Isaiah 60:5.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching: Year A*, p83.

⁵ *Ibid.*

unlikeliest of places, through the unlikeliest of ways, among the unlikeliest of visitors. A young courageous woman and man who had not shared physical intimacy. Smelly shepherds on a random hill in the middle of the country. Animals and stars and angels bearing witness. And astrologers, so used to training their eyes on the heavens, who spotted a star and followed it there.

You know, I wonder if the revealing here for us isn't just in God's action in the world — the “intrusion by Yahweh” — the God-made-flesh, or hope in despair, or light in darkness... but rather what that revealing reflects in us — the restoration, the willingness to look, the availability we offer to God. I wonder if this Epiphany we might celebrate God's revelation in Christ, but also our revelation because of it.

For if you think of it, on the Christmas cards we see and in the nativity scenes that some of us have already packed away, the manger scene complete with Magi traveling from the East is so often shown with one lone star blazing overhead. But in a close reading of Matthew, we're reminded that the Magi don't see just the one star in a blank sky, but rather notice that one star inviting them amidst the thousands that twinkle above. As we remember the unlikely way God came among us, we're reminded that the hiddenness of Christ is sort of God's calling card, God's MO, the way God chooses to act. One writer says this: “instead of "showing forth" conspicuously at the Temple, God slips into the world by way of a poor family in a backwater town. And instead of "showing forth" to a crowd of supposed insiders, God will be noticed first by strangers from a foreign land, “wise ones from the East.” God does indeed show forth - but in a hidden way.” **In each and every step, the ones who receive that revelation, that**

revealing, are the ones who are willing to notice, who stop and look, who arise and go to the new thing God is doing among us.⁶

IV.

Friends, as we reflect on the past year (and heck, even the past decade) — making lists, and considering failures, and looking at pictures of then and now — I wonder: what can we learn from the witness of the magi? What light-bulb revelation, what sign from God, what epiphany small or large would compel us to look, to notice, to warm with the glow of the light we see? How can we arrange our lives and attune our eyes such that we're able to glimpse God's subtle revelations, signs, epiphanies all around us every day?

And I wonder for our church: what might our church learn this year from those weary Israelites exhorted to arise, shine, for their light has come? What might we learn from those who go looking for signs of God? How will we help each other as fellow travelers on the road to fix our eyes firmly on holy light in a world that tries to have us see all the things we don't have, things we are taught to fear, things that demand our attention? What will it ask of us to follow the light of Emmanuel, God with us, Love made flesh, the One who comes to set the world free... **so that** our light — OUR light, our glow, our reflection of the Light that enlightens all — might come?

I imagine that were we to notice the star, were we to lift our heads, were we to risk what we don't yet know or understand, Christ would lead us down paths of our discomfort or sacrifice, roads unfamiliar and distant.

⁶ With gratitude to the good folks of the SALT Project for these most helpful reflections on this week's text and theme!: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/2/showings-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany>

Because when God trains our eyes to start noticing hope in the mustard seed, peace in the plowshares, joy in the found coin, and love in the prodigal child walking up the driveway, I imagine we'd look less to our keyboards and mirrors and refrigerators and treadmills for our salvation. When like the magi we begin looking for signs of God's kingdom breaking in all around us, I imagine that the fears of exile, fears of devastation, fears of Herod would darken our view: fear of what is to come, fear of each other, fear of losing our grip on what gives us security and identity — those fears would dull and diminish in the face of overwhelming joy we experience as we see good news magnify the poor, release come to the captives, recovery open the eyes of the blind, and freedom fall upon the oppressed. When we fix our eyes on the unmistakable light of Christ, no darkness however suffocating or grievous, isolating or scary will be able to trick us into forgetting that all creation is beloved, bound up to God in Christ, worthy of redemption and wholeness, and illuminating this world — and yes, even you and me — with a divine glow that is nothing short of transformational.

V.

I've shared with you before the story I love and have framed in my home of Thomas Merton, the longtime Trappist monk whose life changed one afternoon while out running errands for the monastery.

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district,” Merton says, “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a

special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”⁷

I know that intersection, there in downtown Louisville, and I tell you – it’s really not all that special. Tall buildings, cars whizzing by, people hurrying to and from work, immersed in the busyness and the rhythms and the motions of daily living. And yet, right there in the midst of the ordinary was a sacred, holy moment of unmistakable light which cannot help but to reflect its Source. “A Revelation,” the historical marker says of that spot. An epiphany, reminding people of their glow from sun and Son.

V.

That’s why this matters, this type of looking and seeing and walking as children of the Light no matter our darkness. For we know that the sufferings of this world are real and unyielding. We experience them, we know them, we see them, we are acquainted with these griefs. We choke in the grip of addiction, we burn in the lash of abuse, we grow numb in the grind of consumer culture, we bottom out with exhaustion of life, we are paralyzed in despair over the horrors we see towards the people we can’t save. And quite simply, sometimes we are simply unwilling to notice the light in the midst of

⁷ <https://www.spiritualtravels.info/articles-2/north-america/kentucky-a-thomas-merton-tour/thomas-mertons-mystical-vision-in-louisville/>

such darkness, sometimes we are simply unable to close our eyes to the glitter of the world, sometimes we are simply unavailable to arise and shine.

But we know a deeper truth, a broader hope, a more profound love, and a more powerful light into any darkness — that God has come close, that Christ has illuminated all things, and that the gift — our gift, each one of us walking around in the world — is the glow, the reflection, the light of Christ we carry into each and every day. A glowing up, you might say.

VI.

Today as we celebrate communion together, you'll be given a gift of a star. A "star word" you might call it, but if that sounds too much like *Star Wars*, you can call it a 'star gift.' After you are nourished by bread and cup, you'll see a child holding a basket of these simple paper stars. You'll take one from the basket — just the one on top, no rummaging around to find the word you want!

Once you have your word, begin to ponder how it might enlighten your living this year. Put it somewhere where you can see it every day — perhaps on your refrigerator, or your dashboard, or your computer screen, or your bathroom mirror. Allow God to begin speaking to you through that word. Look it up in the dictionary if you need to! Let it invite you to notice and respond to the world around you in new ways. For in this new year, this new decade, this new season, might God be at work — revealing, illuminating shining forth in the most unlikely ways — and might we join in — noticing, seeking, and letting the Divine light reflected in us cast a glow for the sake of the world.

Arise, shine, for your light — **your** light! — is come! Amen!