

Rise and Shine!
Is. 60:1-6
Jan. 5, 2025
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The sanctuary looks a bit different this morning, doesn't it? Several people worked last week to take down all the Christmas decorations – the tree, the wreaths, the Advent candles. Even the poinsettias have been banished to the breezeway. Feels kind of empty, doesn't it? The same is true with our house. We've finished undecorating and the place feels like the joy was packed away in plastic totes. Based on the weather forecast, if you haven't taken down your outside lights yet, they may still be up for Easter.

Why is taking down the Christmas decorations one of the most dreaded events of the year? I'd like to think that it's because we're so sad that Christmas is over, that we want the joy of this season to go on for months. But I wonder if the truth is we don't want to take down the Christmas decorations because we're so tired from Christmas that we don't have the energy.

I bet if I asked 10 of you "Are you glad Christmas is over?" twelve of you would say, "Yes!" That seems a funny way to respond to the celebration of the Savior's birth, but it's the reality. When we get to this time of year, we're still suffering from a holiday hangover that has nothing to do with eggnog or New Year's Eve. It's just fatigue. That's especially true when you hit the ground running on Jan. 2. Amy and I made the nine-hour drive back from Charleston, SC, on Jan. 1, and I had a 9:30 AM meeting the next morning. I apologize to the participants if I feel asleep at any point. With all the sickness and exhaustion going on, I feel like what we all need is a good two-day nap to get our brains and bodies back in gear...and the weather may be providing that opportunity for us.

But Isaiah's not about to let us get complacent. We're sitting around, slouched over from the holidays, hot chocolate dribbling down our chins, and Isaiah bounces in, all chipper and full of pep. "Rise and shine!" he tells us. Did your parents used to do that to you when you were growing up? Right in the middle of a good sleep, the lights go on and the blinds go up. "Rise and shine!" Five more minutes!

Rise and shine. I'm not a morning person by nature, so these words are especially hard on my ears. In high school, my room was in the basement of our house. It was a cool hangout, but you know what a basement room means – no windows. My internal clock stopped working. Without any natural light to orient me, it always felt like nighttime, which meant I always wanted to sleep. I'm sure being a teenage boy had nothing to do with that. So, when my mom or stepfather would wake me up with "Rise and shine," well, I would rise, but I sure didn't do any shining!

The Israelites didn't feel like doing any shining, either. God had warned them that they needed to change their sinful and selfish ways, that they needed to return to a life focused on God. When they didn't, the empire of Babylon swept in, took over the Promised Land, and sent the Israelites to live in a far-off foreign country as exiles. Preacher Susan Bond says that "they were in a nation of strangers. The street signs were all in a different language, the money was different, the food was not what they knew." They were stuck in a basement bedroom in someone else's house and there were no windows. Their spiritual clocks stopped working. They were in exile, and home was far

away. In our verse today, when Isaiah commands them to “rise and shine,” the Israelites have just returned from this exile. They have come back home to find their nation ransacked and their way of life destroyed. Their whole homeland has been undecorated, and they have to start the process all over again, brick by brick, shrub by shrub.

Could you imagine the loss the Israelites felt when they realized all they had built was gone? I bet we can relate on a smaller scale. Remember back in the days before the cloud? You’d be working on a document for a long time and suddenly your computer would glitch and burp and shut down and you’d realize you hadn’t hit the “Save” button yet. Argh! All that work lost. All those thoughts, those memories, those dreams.

That’s what the Israelites were facing; their entire existence had basically been sent to the recycle bin and they had to start from scratch. They were emerging from the deepest of darkneses and beginning to make that long journey from the despair of exile to the daunting task of starting over. So, Isaiah’s words are basically a pep talk. “C’mon, Israel, get out of bed! Don’t you see the light that is shining in you?” Isaiah tells them, “See, darkness covers the whole earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.”

Isaiah’s image of darkness covering the whole earth could be a modern description. In many respects 2024 was a dark year. I’m not going to depress all of us by listing the reasons why, but the tragedy in New Orleans and the state of our political systems seem like a microcosms of the despair last year brought. How about for you personally? Where did 2024 fall on the darkness-to-radiance continuum? For too many of us, the darkness of a financial challenges or personal illness or disintegrating relationships made us feel like we were cut off from God’s light. And now we move into a new year, 2025, with our hopes rekindled that, despite what the newspaper says, despite the devastation around us, despite our own failing bodies and overall anxiety, maybe this year will be better, maybe this is the year that God’s light breaks through.

No matter how you’re feeling about 2025, Isaiah’s words serve as a reminder of what already is - “the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.” God is with us even now, shining on us and in us. Darkness is all around us, but God’s glory is right here with us. That’s good news, right? Well, if that’s true, why can’t we see it? Why do things sometimes feel so dark to us, like the windows of our soul have been boarded up?

Maybe we’re looking in the wrong place. On our honeymoon in Cancun, Amy and I went ziplining. I’m not a huge fan of heights, but I didn’t want my new wife to think I was a wimp, so I drummed up my courage and went for it. I was doing fine until we got to this very rickety wooden bridge. The bridge looked like it was built by the original Aztecs and had more holes than boards. Sure, we were fastened into the guidewires above us, ensuring there was no way we could fall, but tell that to my shaky knees. Most of the people, including my wife, traipsed across the bridge with no problem, but after I few steps I froze. I honestly thought I couldn’t do it. But, with Amy’s encouragement and my fear of embarrassment being stronger than my fear of heights, I made it. Do you know how? One step at a time. I kept my head down and my eyes focused on the next step. I never looked up, I never looked around me. I stayed focused on the next step. Sure, I missed a gorgeous view of forest, but I also made it to the other end with my lunch still on the inside.

I’m glad Isaiah wasn’t behind me on that bridge, because listen to what he tells the Israelites when they are facing their steepest challenge: “Lift up your eyes, look

around you.” No way! Are you kidding? Then I might realize how high up I am, I might see the dangers all around me – the rickety bridge swaying in the wind, the forest floor thousands of feet – or maybe only 20 feet – below me. I’m keeping my head down.

That’s a tempting approach to surviving life. Keep your head down. Stay focused on the next step ahead of you, the next task ahead of you, the next day ahead of you. Don’t look up, because what you might see may be too scary – children growing up, your body getting older, the world changing. Keep your head down. Focus on getting through today. Don’t look up. But what view might we miss if we do that?

We are about to enter the church season called Epiphany. Epiphany marks the time when Jesus’ true destiny was revealed through his baptism and ministry. The word “epiphany” actually means an unveiling, a revelation, an eye-opening “Aha!” experience. But we run the risk of not seeing the epiphany of God in our lives if our heads are down. Isaiah tells us that the glory of the Lord is over us, but we’ll never see it if we keep our heads down. Sure, with our heads down we can’t see the danger, but we also can’t see the beauty, the majesty, the opportunities, the “Aha!” experiences. What do we miss when we go through life with our heads down? So, we face a choice: do we move forward with our heads down, putting one foot in front of the other, living one day just to get to another? Or do we move forward with our heads up, eyes open, with a sense of hope, looking for God’s presence and God’s blessing in our lives?

We don’t have to look far, because Isaiah tells us that it’s already upon us. We aren’t looking to see something we hope is coming; it’s already here! Christ has already been born! Our lives are already meaningful! The question is whether we choose to live that way, to live a heads-up life. Isaiah’s call to rise and shine has a huge implication for us; it implies that we already have the ability within us to shine. God has already placed within us something special, this light that can illuminate the darkness and warm the cold places of our lives. We don’t light candles in order to hide them under baskets, do we? So why would we go through life with this beautiful light within you always pointed at the ground? Your life is a gift to you. And your life is a gift to others. You are valuable to God. You have a light to shine. I know there’s darkness around, but God’s glory is upon you. So, rise and shine!