

Arise and Shine!

Isaiah 60:1-6, John 1:1-9

Today is Epiphany Sunday as well as New Year's Sunday. Mostly we celebrate the first Sunday in January as Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany means "manifestation." So, we celebrate today the manifestation of the Lord, remembering the coming of the three wise men who brought gifts to the Christ-child. The three wise men found a star, which radiates and guides the manifestation of the Lord Christ. They followed the star to Bethlehem and worshipped the Christ-child. This Christ is the Light of the world.

In this New Year season, we all wish to have a successful life in 2010. We set New Year's resolutions. We want to have New Year's hope. At the beginning of the Year 2010, we dream new dreams. How can we have new hope for year 2010? Last Monday evening, my daughter, Alice, took us, visitors, to a Chinese restaurant with her family. After dinner, a waitress brought Chinese fortune cookies. I picked one, broke it, and found my little fortune paper. It said, "The star of riches is shining upon you." That means I have luck to be rich. Shall I start my new life with this word of fortune? Shall we expect to have good fortune this year?

It's been a long, long time. One of my friends, his name was Chang, was going to marry a beautiful girl, but he didn't have any money at the time. He was a poor seminary student. He had just a little income from a church where he worked as an intern student pastor. He told his senior pastor of his marriage plans, hoping for some aid from the church. His pastor, Rev. Park, told this poor seminarian of his own experience. Rev. Park reminisced that he was also very poor when he got married. Rev. Park told Chang that he had prayed for his marriage preparations. One night, Rev. Park said he went to a Chinese restaurant and ordered Chinese noodle soup with shellfish. In the middle of his meal, he found something in his mouth like a round rock, and he spat it out and found that it was quite a big pearl. So, he was able to make it into a wedding ring for his bride.

My friend, Chang, heard this story and tried several times to find luck. But, he finally gave up going to Chinese restaurants after spending quite a lot of money. But, the story doesn't end there. After twenty five years of marriage, Chang later told me that one day he took his wife to quite an expensive Chinese restaurant in New York for their silver anniversary celebration. He ordered Chinese noodle soup with shellfish, and in the middle of meal, Chang bit into a round rock! He spat it out and found quite big black pearl! He was delighted and made a special ring with this black pearl for his wife. His dream came true after twenty five years! Shall I believe this fortune cookie saying, "The star of riches is shining upon you?" Shall I expect, like this fortune cookie says, good fortune this year?

Today's scripture reading, Isaiah 60:1 says, "Arise and shine; for your light has come."

I would like to share this message with you today. There is a poignant message for us to start this year with courage. The Book of Isaiah is composed of two parts: Chapters 1-39;

and Chapters 40-46. Today's scripture reading, Isaiah 60:1-9, gives us new hope and courage. Have you heard of the social situation in which Isaiah lived? The Babylonian conquest of Judah and Jerusalem in 586 BCE brought massive death and destruction, as attested by archaeological and literary evidence alike. It also caused widespread desperation and despair among the survivors, many of whom were exiled to Babylon.

Isaiah and most of his people, with its rulers, were dragged into Babylon as captives, and his homeland and country were destroyed. There was no hope in the world. They had spent seventy years as people of Exile. No country to belong to, no king to rely on, and no identity as a people. Thus, there was nothing to hope for. And then, as a fellow captive, Isaiah, stood up and shouted to his people, "Arise and shine; for light has come." "Arise and shine!"

Walter Brueggemann, a famous Hebrew Bible scholar, names the two primary dimensions of prophetic activity as prophetic criticizing and prophetic energizing. Prophetic energizing sounds a different note: it uses language to generate hope, affirm identity, and create a new future.

I would like to share three points from this scripture reading.

First, we have to remember that where there is light, there is life. And, the true light is the Word of God.

In Genesis, we see the story of God's creation. In the beginning, when God created the heavens and earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Where does this true light come from? The Gospel of John answers this question.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of the people. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." (John 1:1-5)

The Word of God is life and light. The prophet, Isaiah, brought light and life to the people who lived in darkness. This light is the energizing word of God. It is not a word of criticism. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid."

As a spokesman of God, Isaiah spoke to people of hopelessness, "Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?' "

We need to use this energizing word to our children, our families, friends, neighbors and church members, even in hard time. This energizing word will bring life to the community of faith and nurture spiritual growth.

Secondly, we should remember that you and I are the light of the world. The Lord Jesus affirms us, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house." (Matthew 5:14-15)

How can we be light? In physical science, it is common knowledge that there is no self-radiating substance, except Sun, in the world. But in a spiritual sense, we can be the light of the world. The Lord spoke to his disciples, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in the darkness." (John 8:12)

When we hold the truth of Jesus in our heart, we hold the light and are the light. The darkness cannot overcome the light.

There was a man named Dionysus in ancient Greece. He was a righteous man and sought truth. He used to hold a lamp and walk in the day time. Most people thought that he must be a crazy. A man passing by him asked Dionysus, "Why are you walking, holding a lamp during the day time?" What Dionysus said was, "This world is too dark to walk without falling dawn." He saw the darkness of spirit in his days.

How can we be the light? While the word of God is burning and consuming in our heart, we can be light that shine for others.

Lastly, members of Faith United Methodist Church, listen! Listen to the voice calling, "Arise and shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

Many times we have talked about increasing membership or outreach in the church. But, today we can hear the voice of God, encouraging and energizing us with his word, "Arise and shine!"

I read a similar story to this in the book, Chicken Soup for the Soul.

There was a monastery during the rise of secularism in the nineteenth century. There were five monks left in the monastery. The abbot and the four others were all over 70 years old. Clearly, it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery, there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. The rabbi was known as a wise man by the people. One day, the five monks in the monastery discussed about how they could continue to maintain the monastery, but there was no bright idea among them. Then, the abbot said, "The rabbi, the wise man in the hut, may have some advice that might save the monastery." Everybody agreed and decided to visit the rabbi and ask him for advice.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to synagogue anymore." So, the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. As the abbot was about to leave, the abbot asked again, "Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?" The rabbi said, "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Angel God sent is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well, what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving, was something cryptic –that the Angel God sent is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Angel is one of us? If that's the case, which one is? As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off-chance that one among them might be the Angel God sent, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, people often came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn and saw how the old monks' extraordinary respect for one another. A rumor began to be spread among the people that there is an Angel in the monastery. After that, many young people began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Remember that God encourages us, "Arise and shine; for your light has come."