

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Lori Tisher, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 6, 2008, dedicated to the glory of God!

“A Light In The Darkness”

Part VII of VII in Sermon Series: “Isaiah’s Vision: Welcome the Messiah” Isaiah 60:1-6

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

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Every year, on Christmas day, my family sings “happy birthday” to Jesus (and to my mom, whose birthday happens to be on that same day). This year, we lit the candles on the cake, sang and blew the candles out. Just as we were ready to cut the cake, though, the light came back! We tried again and again, and the light kept coming back!

This is the light of Christ that we celebrate with Christmas every year ... that light that the prophet Isaiah was talking about ... that light that led the wise men to the newborn Jesus! It still remains lit in our hearts and throughout the world today. It is a light that shines in the darkness and never goes out!

My brother worked with AmeriCorps/Vista in Alaska a few years ago. Every year, he marveled as the days seemed to get shorter and shorter, until it was dark all day and all night long. I cannot imagine living in such a world of darkness. The most darkness I ever remember experiencing was in Swaziland, in Southern Africa, where I served with Global Ministries for a year. I was attending a

funeral at a rural homestead for a member of the church youth group who had died from an AIDS related illness. I remember leaving the tent where the funeral services were held, into a land where no homes or shops for miles around had any electricity. It was a night of *pure* darkness – on so many levels. Outside, only the moon shone faintly in the distance. At that moment of darkness, I felt a connection with the wise men, as they made their way to see the baby Jesus so many years ago. They only had the light from the stars in the sky as their guide and the light in their hearts – their faith – as their motivation. As the youth and other church members and loved ones sang through their grief at that dark funeral in rural Swaziland, there was that same faint glimmer of light – the hope that comes in our belief in everlasting life.

In our western world of lights galore, we often forget or sometimes can't even imagine what a world of darkness might be like ... a world in which other senses (besides sight) must be used in order to survive. A friend and colleague of mine, a fellow pastor in Cleveland, is blind. As we have worked together, I have learned so much from him. In many ways he understands his blindness as a gift for ministry. Because he cannot see with his eyes, he is not hindered by the presumptions so many of us make based on what we see. In a world of darkness, he has found an inner light that guides him and helps him move beyond the innate prejudices and assumptions that shape how so many of us think and act in the world. We can learn a lot from those who do not see with their eyes.

This friend of mine is not the only one who has learned how to live life to its fullest, even in the midst of darkness. The United Church of Christ's partner church in Swaziland is Kukhany'okusha Zion Church. In English, *kukhany'okusha* means "new light." When Kukhany'okusha Church was established 25 years ago, they saw themselves as a new light. They were not the *first* light, nor the *only* light, but a *new* light, bringing about Jesus' love to the world in new ways as they lived into Christ's promise of a changed world. As

they continue to grow as a church today, Kukhany'okusha still holds this mantra at the core of who they are. Just a few years ago, this church was one of the first denominations in Swaziland to move beyond the stigma of HIV and AIDS and begin to discuss and respond to this tragic pandemic within the walls of their church. In all that they do, they continue to strive to be a new light of hope in a world distraught with disease, poverty and inequalities.

The struggles that we see and experience around the world today are not new. Even life in ancient Jerusalem and Judah, when the prophet Isaiah was writing, was not always all that great. These ancient Israelites had suffered through so many years of war and the occupation of their own country. They had been forced to become refugees. As foreigners in a land that was not theirs, they had been living in a world of darkness; a world of unknowns; a world that looked quite bleak, at first glance. After such a tumultuous time, though, they slowly began coming back to Jerusalem to rebuild their city and their lives.

This is where the words of the prophet Isaiah that we heard this morning come in. Isaiah is beginning to direct attention away from the Israelites' past and even present struggles and more to a projection of a good, future life, with our loving God of justice at the center. With God's help, Jerusalem will once again become an attractive place, Isaiah promises; a land whose "light" will shine so brightly that everyone will look towards the people of this city, envy them and want to join with them and become a part of this wonderful success story. The end of the Israelites' life story will not end in demise, Isaiah promises, but rather the constant presence of God in their midst will get them through these hard days and years and help them envision a future filled with better times.

This improvement in life requires, though, some effort on the part of the Israelites. Isaiah says, "Arise, shine, for your light has come ... lift up your eyes and look around!" The Israelites could very

well have remained in darkness, pitying themselves for the struggles they had to endure.

Ever feel like that? You wake up in the morning and just don't feel like getting out of bed? Or you're laying on the couch mid-afternoon feeling especially lazy, not wanting to put in the effort get up, get active and contribute your gifts to the wider society? Ever get the post-Christmas blues? The excitement of the holidays are over, now what? We all have moments like that, I'm sure.

Rev. Bob Molsberry, the UCC Ohio Conference Minister, is one man who certainly knows life's struggles. After stumbling through so many of life's tribulations, though, he explains (in his book *Blindsided By Grace*) that "our faith makes room for the occasional disaster" (87). There will, indeed, be times of darkness in our lives. "They will shake us up, to be sure" (87), he says, but our "foundations will not be shaken because they have already been laid on the bedrock of human contingency, not on the sand of wishful thinking" (87).

This hope and understanding of faith that Rev. Molsberry preaches about today is the same dream for lightness overcoming darkness that we hear from the prophet Isaiah. It is the same change that we see in the lives and witness of the ancient Israelites as they move beyond exile. And it is even present in the witness of the miraculous birth of Christ so many years later. The oppressive, ancient Roman world into which Jesus entered was in many ways a world of darkness. Yet there was that one tiny star that shone so brightly over the manger where Jesus was born. It helped lead the wise men to find him. It continued to shine forth from him throughout his life and even after his death. This tiny light was just like the light of Jerusalem that Isaiah promised would shine forth from these people of faith after ancient Israelites recovered from war. And it is the same light of Christ that still burns so brightly

today in the lives and witness of people of faith throughout the world today.

The theme last year for General Synod, the national gathering of our denomination, the United Church of Christ, was “Let it Shine!” As our denomination looked back throughout our history, we lifted up beams of light that have shown forth from the amazing witness of our church over the years. We celebrated so many of the “firsts” that our church proudly claims. We were the first church to establish a foreign mission society; and the first denomination to ordain a woman, an African-American, a gay man and lesbian woman, and so much more! As this new year, 2008, begins, we pray that this theme, “Let It Shine” will continue to guide the innovative and prophetic work, witness and ministry of our church.

As we strive to “Let It Shine,” the challenge today is for us to continue to learn from the ancient witness of Isaiah and to keep trying to live out these understandings today. How will we “arise and shine,” as Isaiah calls us to do, in new ways this year? We never know what a new year holds for us. Yet we do have some control of our actions and our witness, as people of faith. We can commit to being a new light in a world filled with so much darkness. We can and must continue to speak out about injustices, to fight for the rights of those who have none, to help those in need, to love one another with a grace that abounds all understanding. All of this certainly will not always be easy. It will require a lot of prayer, a lot of dedication and a lot of reminders that God is with always us, in times of light *and* in times of darkness. This is the promise of the Holy Scriptures. This is the Good News. God’s light is always with us! May these words of Isaiah, this prophet from so long ago, continue to encourage and urge us always strive to be a new light throughout the world today.

Amen.