

Epiphany: See, Arise, Shine

Isaiah 60.1-6; Matthew 2.1-12

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

A wealthy Chinese businessman came to the United States in the early 19th century. He was fascinated by a strong microscope he saw, and he bought one to take it back to China.

He loved watching the petals of flowers, and crystals through his microscope. One day he decided to study some rice, his beloved staple food. He was appalled when he saw the many tiny creatures crawling on the rice. What to do! He destroyed the microscope as he preferred to be ignorant of reality.

He did not want see the reality of our world. The passage we read this morning from the prophet Isaiah, stresses that we must do the opposite. In the midst of much darkness - things were very bad for the people of God, he repeatedly says: see. Open your eyes.

I am not a pessimist. By nature I am more inclined to focus of how we can change our lives and the world around us. But we do not have to look long and far to see the darkness around us.

See, Isaiah says in his poetic prophecy: See, darkness covers the earth.

It is tempting to not see, and to close our eyes to the misery in the world around us. But God calls us to see!

Let's open our eyes, and see where the real misery is at the moment: in our western societies, there is an increasing divide between the very rich and people who have to scrape by. How in the world is it possible that we need food banks in our rich societies.

Millions and millions of people in this world are adrift because of war and hunger, and because of hopelessness.

A million people in The Netherlands need little pills to be able to manage their depressions.

And the churches have emptied.

What will 2019 bring to us?



We can of course try to define the peace of God as a mostly personal and inner feeling, related to our personal lives, by being inward looking, individualist, by just doing our jobs, by focusing on our family life, and live in our small happy enclaves where we try to keep misery away. But God calls us to open our eyes and look around us.

1. Our darkness

Isaiah 60 was probably written shortly after the first groups of Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. After 70 years of oppression they believed all things would be totally different now.

They were overjoyed to return to their promised land but the deception was enormous. The cities were in ruins, the fields were destroyed, the economy was in shambles. Lawlessness was everywhere.



And then there was this awful dictatorship. The Jewish rulers were using the same brutal methods they had seen in Babylon for staying in power and for oppressing the masses. And the suffering people of Israel tended to cave in. They closed the curtains. They sat on their soft sofa's to hibernate and forget about the world around.

Isaiah tells them: look around you, and arise, that is, get up from your sofa where

we watch TV all time to divert our mind frm reality.... Get up and as you arise, then shine – shine, that is, drive darkness away with your light. Do no be content with personal survival but be God's light in this land.

The Israelites were in bad shape and Isaiah told them that this was not surprising as they had turned their back on God. Now before you think that I am saying that the miseries in our own lives can all be simply traced back to our personal sins against God, no, I am not suggesting that. Life is much more complicated than that.

Centuries after Isaiah spoke, the nation of Israel was still in darkness. They had not risen up, they had not opened their eyes, and they did not let their light shine. Roman armies had occupied the land; the ruler over Jerusalem was Herod - a godless child murdering tyrant, and the nation lacked peace, light, vision.

God's complaint in Isaiah 59.15-16 was justified:

The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him.

Sure, there were righteous Jews, people who truly endeavoured to serve God as peacemakers, people who wanted to be a light in the world. We have met some in the Bible, people like Zachariah, Anna, Mary, Joseph...

But in general, the religious and political leaders were busy taking care of themselves while the people in the land suffered. And those people were not too much interested in serving God.

The masses of the nation suffered; and most lived their miserable lives, trying to survive, complaining about their problems, but without taking any action. They were arm chair revolutionaries at best.

Sometimes we know so well what we need to do. But we just sit and wait on our sofa. As if our problems disappear by themselves. God tells all of us to arise and do what we know we must do.

Do not be part of that sofa party! Take action. The first step is often the hardest but get going and do what must be done. Decide, and then do. And do not postpone!

2. Gods Light

God in his mercy decided to act for the salvation of Israel in a unilateral manner. He did not wait any longer. The fullness of time had come. Isaiah 59.16:

He was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him.

God took the initiative. The early church recognised this saving act of God in Jesus Christ. His birth, his life, his death, resurrection and ascension proved that God had sent him as the Saviour to Israel.

It is interesting that Matthew in his Gospel describes the visit of the Magi to the newborn child Jesus, with imagery heavily borrowed from Isaiah 60. During a time of great darkness for Israel, Kings from the nations came and they took with them the gold, silver and incense that were described by Isaiah 60.3, 6b

Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of dawn...

The nations will come bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

The early followers of Jesus Christ saw in Jesus and the visit of the Magi the fulfillment of this prophecy of Isaiah. Matthew described Jesus as the glory of God that appeared in the darkness of this world. The true light that gives light to every man.



The Magi were heathen people – people with truly bad religious habits. But they had open eyes. They had risen and left their own lands because they saw the star.

Bishop John Chrysostom of Constantinople, around 400 AD, preached on the visit of the Magi and he had some interesting applications from the story of the Magi. He said:

Let us also follow the Magi. Let us depart from the things of earth. For so the wise men, while they were in Persia, saw just the star, but after they had departed from Persia, they saw the Sun of Righteousness. They would not have seen more than the star, if they had not been ready to arise from there. Let us then also rise up.

It is useless to know the truth, to see the truth, if we do not also get going and do it. If you know what you have to do, do not hesitate and arise. If we know what we must do, if we know what God asks of us, then get up.

When the Magi arrived in Bethlehem, they saw the child, and in this child, they saw the truth: this was the King of Israel, even more than a king. Therefore they worshipped him as God.

3. Our action

If we see the darkness around us and we also see him, the salvation of God, we have to arise and shine.

Chrysostom was not very pleased with the people attending his Cathedral Church in Constantinople during the Christmas service. In his sermon on Matthew 2, he said to those people 1600 years ago that they had to follow the example of the Magi:

Let us cast everything out of our hands when we are to worship; even if we have gold, let us offer it unto him and not bury it. For if those barbarians [the Magi] then offered it for the honour of Christ only, what will become of you, if you do not give to Him that has need?

If those men journeyed so far to see Him newly born, what sort of excuse do you have, if you do not go a few streets far for visiting Him sick or in prison?

And they offered gold, you hardly give bread. They saw the star and were glad, but you, seeing Christ Himself a stranger and naked, are not moved.

Chrysostom was not appreciated by his congregation for being as critical as he was. He told them they should not worry so much about looking nice and being wealthy, but to open their eyes for the misery of the poor in their midst.



For the same reason he even dared to speak critically of the Christian Emperor and Empress. Do we as a church have a prophetic message even for society? Well, yes, if we as a church do not want to hibernate but arise and shine.

For Chrysostom, the effect was that he was deposed as bishop after six years. But he preferred exile over hibernation and untruth. What price are we prepare to pay for serving our Lord?

What will the New Year have in store for us? We know we will face many problems – on a personal level, in our families, at work, in society, in politics.

Conclusion

In the midst of the darkness of our lives and times, God says: ‘Get up, come out of your cave, and face the realities of darkness and misery, but also the reality of Gods salvation.’ And if we see that, get up, and catch the Light of God to shine!

He asks us to see: see the darkness around you, but also the salvation that He brought in Jesus. If we cave in to keep our eyes closed for the darkness of the world, we may also miss out on grasping the Light of the world.

He tells us to arise, which means, that we must take the conscious decision to not cave in, but to take a stand against the darkness around us. Do what must be done, take a step. Take a stand. Do not postpone.

Thirdly, we are challenged by the prophet to shine. Bringing light in the darkness means that we are agents of change. God asks this from us, to be world changers, instead of couch sitters.

We can be agents of change in the new year, because our Light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen over us.

Shining means following the example of the true light. Giving bread to the needy, help the sick, visit those in prison, work for human rights, help the poor develop themselves, and also: proclaim good news to all men. Speak to others about our Saviour Jesus Christ.

If you get up, look at Jesus, and follow his example, you will be beacons of hope in this world. You will be able to give people hope that the Kingdom of Peace of our Lord will one day come and that even today he can make our life so full of light with the presence of God himself.

+ Amen