

Michael McGowan

Text: Isaiah 60:1-9

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“Some years ago I heard Neal Plantinga tell the story of the farmer whose wife went into labor one dark night in the nineteenth century. As the doctor tended to the woman, he asked the husband to stand near the bedside with a lantern. Soon the woman delivered a healthy baby boy. But then the doctor called out, “Wait a moment—another one is coming,” and the woman then delivered a twin baby. That was surprising enough until the doctor called out that yet another was coming. Suddenly the farmer began to move out of the room. “Hey,” the doctor exclaimed, “come back here with that lantern!” “Oh no,” the man replied, “it’s the *light* that attracts ’em!””  
(Scott Hoezee, Center for Excellence in Preaching)

Epiphany celebrates the coming of Christ as a light to all nations...

Let’s turn to Isaiah 60:1-9.

Hear now the Word of the Lord.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

<sup>2</sup> See, darkness covers the earth  
and thick darkness is over the peoples,  
but the Lord rises upon you  
and his glory appears over you.

<sup>3</sup> Nations will come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

<sup>4</sup> “Lift up your eyes and look about you:  
All assemble and come to you;  
your sons come from afar,  
and your daughters are carried on the hip.

<sup>5</sup> Then you will look and be radiant,  
your heart will throb and swell with joy;  
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,  
to you the riches of the nations will come.

<sup>6</sup> Herds of camels will cover your land,  
young camels of Midian and Ephah.

And all from Sheba will come,  
 bearing gold and incense  
 and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.  
<sup>7</sup> All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you,  
 the rams of Nebaioth will serve you;  
 they will be accepted as offerings on my altar,  
 and I will adorn my glorious temple.

<sup>8</sup> "Who are these that fly along like clouds,  
 like doves to their nests?"

<sup>9</sup> Surely the islands look to me;  
 in the lead are the ships of Tarshish,  
 bringing your children from afar,  
 with their silver and gold,  
 to the honor of the Lord your God,  
 the Holy One of Israel,  
 for he has endowed you with splendor.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

Isaiah's announcement of other nations coming to sing the praises of God would not have went over well with the Israelites.

These were God's special covenant people—

To them belonged the promises of salvation and restoration.

They were unique in that God chose them.

But let's back up and look at the history really quickly:

In the tower of Babel (Gen 11) the people of the world gathered together to build a city.

We're told that they all spoke the same language—

No confusion with some speaking Spanish, others Arabic, some Dutch, other Swahili,  
 and Mandarin—

They could all understand the other person.

And as a group they set out to build a tower that reached to the heavens.

In doing so they ignored their creator.

They wanted to make a name for themselves apart from the God who created them...

So God confused their language—

He made it so they couldn't understand each other—

And he scattered them all over the earth.

So then there were different nations with different people groups speaking different languages.

Now fast-forward an unknown number years...

And we see God wanting to bring redemption to his creation.

The sins of the people broke his perfect world...

And now God was unrolling his plan to fix it.

And, in his wisdom, he chooses to do this through one specific group of people.

Out of the multitude of nations that existed in the world...

God chose one ethnic group from which he would bring a Savior...

This group was the Jews...(aka Israelites)

Abraham's descendants.

In a very real sense, if an outsider wanted to have a relationship with the one true God...

Then they had to become a part of the Jewish people.

The Jews were God's people...

And every other nation is God's enemy...

And therefore an enemy to the Jews. (Mouw, 65)

Two well-known enemies of the Israelites in history were the Egyptians and Assyrians.

The Egyptians were the ones who enslaved the Jews.

They oppressed them under backbreaking labor for hundreds of years.

When Moses asks Pharaoh to "let God's people go" he says, "No!"

Throughout Scripture the Egyptians are a well-known foe of the Israelites.

The Assyrians are also in this category.

They captured the capital of Israel's Northern Kingdom.

Over the course of 3 years they laid siege to the city and drove out all of the Jews.  
(2 Kings 17)

Israel is right to have a suspicion of other nations.

After all, God did choose *them* as his treasured possession from all the earth.

Maybe they were justified in not wanting to hear that other nations would be coming to God's light...

Especially when we take into account that this passage was most likely addressed to Israelites coming back to a destroyed Jerusalem after Babylonian captivity.

So we have the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians all as major foes of the Israelites.

What this does is set up an "us" versus "them" mentality that's hard to shake.

Israel versus the rest of the nations.

God's people versus God's enemies.

We see it in the story of Jonah...

When he refuses to go to the pagan city of Nineveh...

Capital city of the Assyrian Empire.

"Why should this city experience God's mercy when it's deserving of God's wrath?"

"We, the Jews are God's people, not them."

If we're not careful, we too develop this same attitude:

An "us" and "them" mentality.

During the apartheid days in South Africa there was a white clergyman sent to lead a service in an outlying area.

At the service were a group of South African soldiers.

One of the soldiers was of a mixed race...

Officially classified as "Colored" under the racial laws of the time.

The visiting clergyman refused to start the service until this soldier of a lower status left.

When asked why he denied Lord's Supper to a fellow citizen serving his country, he replied:

"Since when is he a fellow citizen?"

I don't think our "us" and "them" mentality is this blatant or bold today.

But in the Church we do struggle with how to navigate diversity.

For hundreds of years, it *seems* like the Western World (Europe, North America especially) has held the distinction of "God's people."

Theologically *we* determine what's right and wrong.

We decide what is appropriate and inappropriate for worship.

And whenever people different from us want to come in...

It's always "them" coming into "our" church.

And when "they" start to outnumber "us" we want to close the doors and stop shining the light...

"They're attracted to the light!"

But the picture that we're given this morning from Isaiah opens us up to God's far-reaching mission...

How his light is for *all* people.

God's light is a light that attracts people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Isaiah's picture is of God's eternal city...

A community where God gathers all of his people.

This is no longer a place determined by ethnicity, nationality, or language.

God's people were once determined by these demographics—

You had to be a Jew—

But it was always his goal and his plan to reach the whole world...

Even those who were considered foreigners and "enemies."

Remember the Egyptians and Assyrians?

Could they be a part of the nations attracted to the light of God's new community?

We have to say, "Yes!"

Listen to these profound words from Isaiah 19:23-25:

<sup>23</sup> In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together.

<sup>24</sup> In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. <sup>25</sup> The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt *my people*, Assyria *my handiwork*, and Israel *my inheritance*."

"A day is coming" says the Lord, "when I will gather nations to my light."

Those walking in the darkness of sin...

Those living outside of God's family...

Will be brought in.

They'll see a bright light shining from afar and make their way to the place where God is.

This is Epiphany!

The revealing of God's glory to the rest of the world...

The revealing of Christ to the Gentiles...

To all of those who were formerly on the outside of the promise...

To us.

We too are those who have been attracted to the light.

When we were living in darkness—

Lost in our sin—

The light of the world came to us...

Christ came to rescue us in all of our brokenness.

This is God's mission in the world:

To rescue everyone he's called;

And to redeem everything he's created.

And now we await the complete fulfillment of Isaiah's vision...

When people from every nation will gather together in the light of God's presence...

When we all stand together and worship the Lord.

God's redemption of everything he's created is happening now.

And as a Christian community—

As a church—

We are a foretaste and a model of what that's going to look like.

Of course we are unable to bring about the complete fulfillment of Isaiah's vision...

But God is using the church to shine his light in our dark world now...

And it's a light that's reaching people from all places.

"The church, right here and right now, must be a place into which the peoples of the earth are being gathered for new life." (Mouw, 81)

For some of us this is scary.

We feel uncomfortable with people who are different from us.

There is a tangible fear that we feel when talking about reaching out to our neighbors...

Many who are from different countries, have different colored skin, speak a different language, and live in different cultures.

But these too are people attracted to the light...

These too are people whom God is calling to himself.

These too are people living in darkness—

Needing the healing balm found in the presence of Christ to soothe their wounds.

These are people just like us.

People who were once strangers to the promise, but now attracted to the light of Christ.

If we don't have people from every tribe, tongue, and nation...

Then we don't have God's vision of heaven.

We don't have God's vision of heaven...

And we don't have the blessings and gifts that the nations bring.

Look at what's brought to God's heavenly city:

The wealth of the seas; the riches of the nations; herds of camels; gold and incense;  
Kedar's flocks; Nebaioth's rams; silver and gold coming on the ships of Tarshish.

The nations bring their wealth into God's community.

Many of us have this vision of heaven as the place *up there*.

After everything on earth is destroyed, we all float up to heaven...

Where there are our resurrected bodies, God and fluffy clouds.

But the biblical vision of heaven is a lot more exciting!

It's described as a city that comes down from heaven...

A city that knows redemption.

Earlier I mentioned Jonah.

When Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh, he fled.

And where did he flee?

He fled to Tarshish on a ship.

These were thought to be rather large, impressive vessels that could carry heavy loads for long distances.

They're associated with pride and pagan uses.

Jonah was carried away from God's purpose on one of these ships...

These ships were symbolic for something used in rebellion against God.

But in Isaiah's vision we see redemption.

These ships are now used to fulfill God's will...

They're bringing God's people into his presence along with silver and gold.

Things from the nations that were once used in defiance of God...

Are not destroyed...

They're redeemed!

They're made new.

They're transformed and now are used for God's purposes.

It's not just material things either.

It's the wealth of culture from the nations.

We see this happening now.

A few nights ago I asked Kristi what are some things that you appreciate from other cultures...

Her immediate response was food!

The diversity of flavors that come from unique combinations of meats, breads and spices...

Ethiopian, Indian, and Mexican (just to name a few).

She said, "hospitality."

Where some cultures are so good about welcoming their guests...

Giving us their bed...giving us the best food in the house...the seat of honor at the table.

Friendliness.

With our babies being born we've had more women in head wraps stop to talk to us than any other group of people...

It didn't matter that we were obviously a different color, and obviously a different religion and culture...

They were just so friendly and excited for us.

This is just a foretaste of what's to come in God's heavenly city...

Where he brings all of his people together into his light.

Where things that were once broken and used in rebellion against God...

Are now used for his service.

The light of Christ has come into the darkness of our world.

Christ has revealed himself to us as God...

As God who frees us from our sin.

But it's not just us—

He's come to the world not just for our sake—

But for the sake of the nations.

He has children all over the world...

And he's calling them back to himself.

And the way he's doing this is through the church...

Through us.

So have this be your expectation and your prayer.

That God would use us...

And the light that he gives us...

To shine for the world to see so that they might know that there is a God who loves them in the midst of their darkness.

Amen.