

The Word of God Isaiah 60:1, 2, 4;; Mark 1:4--5, 9--11
Translation by Taylor Burton--Edwards

Reader 1: Rise up, shine, O shine out, Jerusalem! Your light has come!
The glory of the Lord has risen upon you!

Reader 2: Behold, I will send my messenger where you will all see her,
and my road builder, and he will prepare the way.
She will cry out in the desert, her voice resounding in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make every byway a highway!”

Reader 1: Yes, darkness and gloom will form a veil over the earth and all nations,
but over you, wherever you are, the Lord shall appear,
and God’s glory shall be seen upon you.

Reader 2: John appeared, baptizing in the desert, and proclaiming
a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
And people from all of Judea and every neighborhood of Jerusalem
were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan,
calling their sins out loud as they were plunged beneath the river.

Reader 1: Lift up your eyes, look all around you, and see!
All your descendants are gathered together again:
your sons from far away, your daughters upon their nurses’ arms.

Reader 2: And in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee
and was baptized by John in the Jordan.
And as soon as he rose up from the water,
he lifted up his eyes and looked around.
The sky was split, and the Spirit alighted upon him like a dove.
Readers: And there was a voice from the sky:

**All: You are my beloved child.
I am delighted in you!**

Reader 1: God was speaking in those days, through prophets, preachers,
and voices from the sky. Glory!

Reader 2: God is still speaking today, through Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Readers: And so in these days, we will not fail to rise up, and shine, and say:

All: I am a child of God.

GOD IS SPEAKING

Those last four lines of today's reading are not directly out of the text. They're really a little sermon: GOD IS SPEAKING TODAY THROUGH CHRIST IN US, THE HOPE OF GLORY. AND SO IN THESE DAYS WE WILL NOT FAIL TO RISE UP, AND SHINE, AND SAY "I AM A CHILD OF GOD."

What does that mean? If we are very quiet and hold our hands to our ears and beg God to speak to us, we are likely to hear nothing supernatural, no cracking of thunder, no voice coming from the clouds.

But I'm reminded of a line that I heard in the Lego Ninjago movie last night as Jackie Chan says, "The greatest power comes from things unseen." I would take that further to say, "The greatest voice cannot be heard by our ears." The greatest voice speaks to our heart. I'm reminded of Psalm 46:10 which says, "Be still and know that I am God."

In the stillness is where we go to find God. I'm sure that not of few of you here have come to momentarily break away from the constant hustle of life – even in an age where smart phones get most of our attention I see no one here with their eyes down looking at one. Whether you do that because your parents told you not to or because something inside you said, "this is a holy place; I'm not going to defile it," you have chosen to do that, because you believe that in this place God might have something to say to you. And either you come back because God HAS spoken to you in this place, or if he hasn't you at least have faith that someday he WILL. I hope that today is that day.

And Taylor Burton-Edwards, the guy who took those scripture passages and scripted them out for Carol and Jason this morning, has taken a little liberty of interpreting the scripture for us today, in a good way, I believe. In essence he says that God IS speaking to us today through Christ, and so we are able to RISE UP AND SHINE. Our scripture reading starts with an Old Testament prophecy that God is sending a messenger to prepare the way for the return of none other than God, then transitions to the New Testament where Mark informs us that John the Baptist is that messenger and Jesus is God, God incarnate; God in the flesh. In a world that tends to draw a very rigid line between what is human and what is divine, people struggle with that notion that God appears in the flesh. Not only that, but he appears as a vulnerable little baby born to a poor young Jewish couple, and later he will die on a cross at the hands of a great military power. Just as we expect a God who speaks to us through the clouds, we expect one who defeats any human enemy. Of course we know that Jesus does defeat our enemy, which is sin and death, through his resurrection, and that is how he is able to speak to us today.

But what is he saying? RISE AND SHINE, PEOPLE. Some will say that the world is getting to be a better place; some will say it getting worse. But all would agree that there's a lot of room for improvement. Evil still raises its ugly head. And we as Christians believe that Jesus HAS defeated the powers of evil once and for all; it's just a matter of time before God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. And we have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve as God's representatives on earth. We have been called to RISE AND SHINE!

But in order to do that, we need to listen to the first thing God tells us today, which is the first thing that God tells Jesus at his baptism; **YOU ARE MY BELOVED. I'M PLEASED WITH YOU!** That's right; you are a child of God and he is pleased with you. You may not be pleased with yourself; you may be saying, "Pastor, there's too much dirt in my life; too much sin that I enjoy; too little love and compassion for God or for others." But you have to understand; that doesn't change God's assessment of you; you are still a child of God, and he loves you. He sees beyond the NOW and sees you as **YOU WILL BE**, maybe not today or tomorrow, but one day, **IN GLORY**, when all that is not good will be washed away. He sees you as sinless, flawless, wonderful in his eyes. I mentioned the struggle that we have of seeing God in human form – how our minds like to create this barrier between God and us. We create that same barrier with Jesus; we put more emphasis on his divinity and we downplay his humanity. How so? We look at the things he did in his ministry and we say, "That's easy for HIM. HE'S JESUS." In our worship we raise him up, but in the process we too often bring ourselves down. But the core message that Jesus gives us is **TO FOLLOW HIM**. "If you love me," he says, "you will keep my commandments." And Jesus faced the same struggles and temptations that we do every day, and I believe that it was more than simply that fact that "He is Jesus" that empowered him to overcome those temptations.

And part of what empowered him was *KNOWING THAT HE WAS ACCEPTED BY GOD*. As humans we strive for acceptance. We want to know that we are loved and accepted by others. We often settle for something less, called *AFFIRMATION*. Affirmation is what we get on Facebook when people view and "like" our posts. They're saying, "I agree" or "I approve" but that's far less than acceptance. Acceptance is what we get when the person we ask to marry us says "yes." Acceptance is what we get when the person we long to be accepted BY finally asks, "Will you marry me?" Marriage is the best analogy we have for the way our relationship with God should be. Just read Songs of Solomon. Boy, that's steamy! But that kind of love is what God is communicating to us. That kind of acceptance is what God communicated to Jesus at his baptism when he said, "You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased."

And what did Jesus do to show how loved and accepted he was by God? He went around showing love and acceptance of others, **EVEN THE RIFF-RAFF**. My point is that we need to hear those words of acceptance from God today. That is why we're doing a reaffirmation of our baptismal vows. God equips you to go into the world, **TO RISE AND SHINE**, by doing nothing more than communicating his **LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE** of you. The primary task that we as Christians have is to **DECLARE THAT LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE** to others in word and in deed. The way we communicate that love and acceptance in word and deed takes on many forms – it may not involve speaking at all – often times I've found it involves **SHUTTING UP** when my impulse is to say something. But we're empowered to do that by none other than the certainty that we are children of God, loved and accepted despite **ANYTHING** past or present. Jesus communicated God's love and acceptance of us in the most perfect way – by dying for us. He said that there is no greater love than that one dies for his friends, "You are my friends" What a comforting, empowering thought! So as we prepare to reaffirm our baptismal covenant, let us prayerfully sing, "Open Our Eyes, Lord"