

KNU International English Church
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Here come the Foreigners

It is that time of year, the advent season, Christmas. And you know what the Christmas season brings to me? It gives me a vast sense of overwhelming.....busyness. I have too much to do and not enough time to do it. It is the end of the semester, so I have grading to finish and attendance numbers to write in the computer, plus church things to do and plans to make and a million other things to do. Last week, I made a list of all the things I need to do before I go to America tomorrow. The list was so long, it was scary.

But, luckily, when I do have a moment to catch my breath, I can go outside into a lovely day consisting of dark, overcast, cold, depressing weather. SIGH. It makes me say “eeeeaaawhhh”. If you didn’t catch that the first time, it makes me go “eaaaaawhhhh.”

So, sometimes I find myself missing out on some of the pure joys of the advent season that I used to experience as a child. And I’ll bet there are a few more people like me in the congregation today; people who are too busy to stop and enjoy life. People who also get a little sad and tired when the weather turns nasty. But, luckily, this is not fatal. I was out walking last week, and my fiancé pointed out the moon to me. It was huge, and it was full, and it was beautiful. And as we walked, we just kind of watched it. And I felt myself smiling. It does us good to stop and remember the beauty and joy all around us, even when our lives can be frustrating.

Isaiah 60 reminds us of what it means in our lives to gaze upon the Lord. Let’s start with verse 1 and go to verse 6:

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

2 See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.

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

4 “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.

5 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.
6 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.

I like this passage, because it is a passage of joy. It says so right in verse 5, “your heart will throb and swell with joy”. This passage begins with a call to the people to “arise”. It is time to get up and wake up, because something great is happening. I remember when I was a kid, if I was waking up to go to school, I would complain to my mom, “Mom, I’m too tired, I need to sleep some more.” But, if we were doing something fun that day, I would spring out of bed early, all excited. “Mom, let’s go! Come up, I just can’t wait!” I imagine this kind of rising, because you are just too excited to sleep any longer.

We rise up because the light has come, and the glory of the Lord is here. You see, the world has been covered in darkness. Everywhere people look they see sin and pain and hopelessness. But this cannot last, because the coming of the Lord is a lightness that draws everyone to it like a moth to flames. The coming of Christ brings hope to all people. The birth of Jesus is a sign of hope to all people. Christ’s birth is the answer to the darkness in the world.

And the only response to this hope is to lift our eyes to see the glory of God, to be radiant in God’s presence, and for our hearts to swell with joy. Our response to God is to live our lives loving and enjoying.

Of course, this passage was not originally only talking about the birth of Christ. Instead, it was a reference to restoring the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, of course, was the city of Israel. It was a beacon for the Jewish people. And it was overrun and destroyed. The people of God were scattered to other cities and other countries. Now, the light of God can be understood to mean that God would help restore the city and bring back all of the scattered people. And the restoration of Jerusalem is seen as the restoration of the people of Israel, God’s people.

For the Jewish people, this passage would represent hope for them, that God had not forgotten them. Even though they had been through many trials and hard times, God was still with them, in all of his Glory.

However, this passage also goes further. It is very scandalous because it includes the gentiles. It says that the light is for people of every nation. God is including people who were never part of Israel or Jerusalem. What was once considered unclean and unacceptable is now considered pure and acceptable. God is opening up his love and grace for all people. This is good and joyous news for us,

since I believe everyone here today is a gentile. We are all outsiders who have been accepted into God's family as a natural born child.

In our scripture, the nations of the world will bring God all of their riches and camels and gold and incense. In other words, people will come bringing special gifts from their own country. The gifts are symbolic because they mean the combining of a culture to God's Kingdom. As an American, I can give all of have, my ethnicity, my culture, myself, to God. The same for Koreans and Chinese people and Germans and so on.

So, people from other nations coming and bringing gifts to God. Does this sound like something you've heard before in the Christmas story. That's right, the story of the wise men, or magi. These were a group of astrologers who saw the star and followed it to worship Jesus Christ and offer him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They most likely came from the middle east area, and they were Gentiles who came to the light in joy at the birth of the messiah.

Marrianne Williamson wrote one of my favorite speeches about being a child of God. Here it is:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

But, too often, we read the Christmas story; this amazing, rebellious story of God breaking into our world and saving us and giving us hope and being a light in this sometimes dark world; and we think, "that's nice". It's so much more than nice. It should encourage us to stop and see all the great things going on in this world, and it should encourage us to love a little more, and spend a little more time with our family and friends.

And most of all, it should give us hope.

As you go out and prepare for Christmas day this week, remember that the great joy in our lives is that Christ is a light that shines into the darkness, and try to share that light and that joy with others around you.