

Breaking Out

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6

January 3, 2010

I. Introduction

A. Roseanne Hill, of Cedar Crest, NM shares this story with us –

1. My friend Dorothy had spent several weeks in prayer and special training to lead a Bible discussion group. Finally the big day arrived for the first class.
2. Getting her family of six out the door was more hectic than usual that morning. Breakfast didn't turn out right and several arguments were going on among the children. Dorothy, quickly getting frazzled, tried to regain her composure.
3. In the midst of the bedlam, her husband entered the kitchen and surveyed the uproar.
 - a. "Kids! Settle down!" he admonished. "Your mom has only 45 minutes until she has to become a radiant Christian."
4. We might find that story more amusing if it wasn't so true to life for many of us
 - a. We believe that Christians are to reflect the light of Christ in our lives
 - (1) We sing "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine"
 - b. But so often, the frustrations and worries and fears of normal life
 - (1) Get in the way, and we don't always feel very Christ-like, or very radiant

A. The prophet Isaiah, in our scripture passage for today

1. Suggests that the people of Israel would be radiant and joyful
 - a. When they saw what God was going to do in their midst
2. God's light was about to dawn upon them, or burst upon them, in a new way
 - a. And when it happens, Isaiah says, the people would break out with joy
3. Bursting in, and breaking out
 - a. Sounds like a good theme for Advent doesn't it

A. And today is Epiphany Sunday on the Christian calendar

1. The traditional time to hear the story of the wise men from the east
 - a. Who saw the light of a special star and followed it to Bethlehem
 - (1) To find and worship the baby Jesus, the new-born King of the Jews
2. Epiphany also carries the meaning of a new light dawning
 - a. As it surely must have for those wise men
 - (1) Bringing a new understanding into the darkness of our world
 - (a) Or into the darkness of our minds

- A. Our scripture text brings those two themes together –
 - 1. First, pointing toward the light, or the glory of God bursting into the world
 - a. A prophecy that found fulfillment in the birth of Jesus
 - 2. And then, what seems to be a foreshadowing of the visit of the wise men
 - a. When we read about nations and kings being drawn to that light
 - (1) Camels bearing the wealth of the world
 - b. And specifically mentioning gold and frankincense
 - (1) Two of the gifts that were brought by the wise men to honor the new king
- A. We have been using the language of God “bursting into” our world
 - 1. Throughout this Advent and Christmas season
 - a. Almighty God, breaking through from the heavenly realms
 - (1) To dwell among us in human form
 - 2. Last Sunday we began to shift our focus from the “bursting in” to the “breaking out”
 - a. As we thought about our response to the Christmas story
 - (1) Joining with all creation to break forth in praise to God
- A. And this morning, we take another step from there to the preposterous notion
 - 1. That when God bursts into our world, and into our lives
 - a. The world, and we, will change in such a way
 - 2. So that even though Jesus is no longer living among us in his human form
 - a. The light of his presence is still shining brightly...through those who believe
 - (1) Through us! Continually breaking forth in our homes/community/world
 - 3. And that same light that attracted and guided the wise men to Bethlehem
 - a. Has the same power to draw men, women and children to Jesus today!
- A. And so as we come to the end of the Advent/Christmas season
 - 1. We are nearly returning full circle to the theme of our first Sunday
 - a. When we talked about Jesus coming into our world to bring light to the darkness
- A. Isaiah’s vision of a new day dawning in Israel is not so much different
 - 1. Than many of the hopes and dreams that we hear expressed
 - a. And perhaps we have expressed ourselves as we begin the new year
 - 2. 2009 is largely perceived as a year of darkness
 - a. With worries about the economy here in our country
 - (1) And fears about a growing security threat world-wide
 - 3. Whether our lives have been personally affected by these conditions, or not

- a. The beginning of a new year gives us a reason to look forward to, and hope for
 - (1) A year to come that will be better than the one just passed
- 4. Isaiah was seeing an even greater change in store for the nation of Israel
 - a. His words would surely have brought to mind memories from the past
 - (1) Of a time when Israel was prospering, and the kingdom felt secure
 - b. When rulers came from all over the world to seek her favor
 - (1) And the “God of Israel” seemed to be fully in control
- 5. There will be a time of darkness, Isaiah warns the people of his day
 - a. But in the midst of that darkness, look for the new light to come
- 6. Look for the new thing God is going to do among you
 - a. Because it will be such a glorious expression of light in the darkness
 - (1) That all the world will be attracted by the wonder of it all
- A. And what would that new thing look like?
 - 1. First, the people of God would return to their homeland
 - a. From where they had been scattered abroad
 - 2. And then, peoples and rulers from other nations would also come
 - a. Bringing with them the wealth of their kingdoms, as gifts
 - (1) To honor the greatness and might of the God of Israel
- A. Isn't that a dream we can all identify with in some form or another?
 - 1. We would love to see our nation and our communities prosper
 - a. Young people returning, building new homes, raising their families
 - (1) Businesses flourishing, incomes rising
 - 2. Hey, we even long for a sports team that we can identify with
 - a. Doing well and becoming known as a successful team
 - 3. I'm still amazed at how good it can feel when a “home team” wins an important game
 - a. Even though it is of such little consequence in the bigger picture of life
- A. We all want to be on the winning team, to be seen as successful
 - 1. We are certainly not immune to that desire when we think of our church either
 - a. To the point that we can feel discouraged when we see
 - (1) Another group of fellow Christians growing faster or larger than our own
 - 2. And it strikes me that many people who heard Isaiah speak this prophecy
 - a. May have gotten more excited about the prosperity that is envisioned
 - (1) Than they did about what God was doing

- 3. They surely liked the idea of foreigners bringing their valuable gifts
 - a. But seemingly missed out on the part about those strangers
 - (1) Proclaiming their praise to the one true God
- A. The story of the wise men, preserved down through the years
 - 1. Stands even today as a witness to the divine identity of Jesus, the Messiah
 - a. Strangers and foreigners, coming to the light that came from heaven
- A. And what is that light? Is it personal or national wealth or security
 - 1. Or does it have something more to do with right living?
- A. Did those wise men find the way to be successful in life when they found Jesus
 - 1. Or were they responding to something even greater
- A. Was Isaiah's message about God bringing peace and prosperity
 - 1. Or was it more about seeing God's mercy and love
- A. What I would like for us to consider this morning
 - 1. Is that the light that shines most brightly in the darkness of our world
 - a. Just as in the time of Isaiah and in the world of the wise men
 - (1) Is the pure, unconditional love of Almighty God
- A. Love shows us the way to God – just like the star that led the wise men
 - 1. As we open our hearts to worship Jesus as our king today
- A. And God's love shows us the way to live as subjects of his kingdom
 - 1. In a world that so often portrays love as nothing more than a fickle human emotion
 - a. Here one day and gone the next
- A. God's love is so much more than that – and I believe that if our lives
 - 1. And our testimony today lack the power to attract people to Jesus Christ
 - a. It may be that we have never really followed the star to Bethlehem
 - 2. Never really understood the significance of the baby Jesus being born into our world
 - a. Never received for ourselves the self-sacrificing love of a God
 - 3. Or else we have simply forgotten – that our whole life depends on that love
 - a. And our existence throughout eternity depends on our response to that love
- II. Charles Colson tells a story about a political prisoner he heard about some years ago
 - A. This man had been involved in the struggle for democracy in Ecuador. The military cracked down, and he was arrested. Without trial, they threw him into a cold dungeon with no light and no window. For three days he endured the solitary fear and darkness that can drive a person mad.

- A. Just when the situation seemed unbearable, the huge steel door opened, and someone crept into the darkness. There were sounds of the person working on something in the opposite corner. Then the figure crept out, closed the door, and disappeared.
 - A. Minutes later the room suddenly blazed with light. Someone, perhaps taking his life into his hands, had connected electricity to the broken light fixture.
 - 1. That prisoner would one day be released, and eventually became President of Ecuador. And, as he would later say, "The light was important because it gave meaning and focus to my existence in that dungeon. But beyond the light, was the hope I received because of knowing that somebody cared."
 - A. Even more important than the light we can see with our eyes
 - 1. Is the light of God's love and care for us that Jesus brought into our world
 - a. And that light comes to us today through the message of scripture
 - (1) Through our prayer life and the work of the Holy Spirit
 - 2. But one of the most tangible ways we experience God's light and love
 - a. Is through the words and actions of God's people
 - A. That's why it is so important that allow God's love to shine in our lives
 - 1. Not so we can make a good impression by how radiant we look
 - a. Not so we can attract people to ourselves, or even to our church
 - 2. But so that people around us, neighbors or strangers, friends or foreigners
 - a. Will be attracted to the love of God they see reflected in our lives
 - A. Someone has said that Christian people are to live in such a way that as we walk up and down the streets of life, people will find themselves attracted. Not by our appearance, but by our love. And when we become such people, revival will break out, and people who are living in the darkness of this world, will want to know what we are about
- III. It sounds easy, and it would be if we could keep ourselves out of the way
- A. Of what God is doing, and wants to do, among us
 - 1. But we often focus on what God is doing for us, rather than through us
 - A. We're like the little girl who came home from Sunday school, where she had been taught the verse: Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven. She asked her mother, when she repeated the verse, what it meant. Her mom said, "Well, it means that when you are good and kind and thoughtful and obedient, you are letting Christ's light shine in your life before all who know you."

- A. The very next Sunday in Sunday school, the little girl got in a bit of a fracas with another student and created somewhat of an uproar--to such an extent that the Sunday school teacher had to go and find her mother to get her settled down a bit in the class. Her mother was concerned when she got to the classroom and said, "Sweetie, don't you remember about letting your light shine for the Lord?" The girl blurted out, "Mom, I think I have blowed myself out."
- A. Maybe a good new year's resolution would be to not blow out the light within us
 - 1. And to let the love of God "break out" even more in our lives this year
- A. We don't always have to look like radiant Christians every moment of every day
 - 1. But the more we experience the light of God's love shining on us
 - a. The more we can share that light and that love
 - 2. Arise, shine, for your light has come
 - a. And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you! Amen.