

So What Has Changed?

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Epiphany Isaiah 60:1-6

*“Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you...
you shall see and be radiant...”*

Have you ever taken a chance with something, something that seemed like a good idea, or something that was supposed to make your life better, and found that it took more work than you expected? Take the computer, for example. You hear about how much good it can do, how much time it can save, and you finally agree to enter into the world of tomorrow... today. So you take the time and energy to actually research the kind of computer you want to purchase, you make the purchase, and mail in all of the rebates as every responsible consumer should. You dig through the boxes, and somehow manage to figure out how to assemble the monolith, screen, keyboard, and all of the other attachments. And then you turn it on and wait for the magic to happen. Months later, you find yourself, still staring, and peering at the computer screen, trying to fix one thing or another, trying to understand how it works, still surrounded by the empty boxes, tolling up the hours you have spent fixing and operating the confounded metal box, and wondering when life is going to be made better by the amazing computer which is now out of date. In the midst of the mess you have found yourself in, as you wandered out of exile of the land of pencil and paper and into the promise land of technology you find yourself wondering how life has changed for the better.

Have you ever taken a chance, and found yourself in a bigger mess than you wanted, expected, or planned for?

Read the Bible, read the passage for today from Isaiah, and you enter into the same kind of reaction with the Israelites who are also asking, “Was it worth it, or are we in a bigger mess than before?”

When the Israelites finally returned home from Babylon, they found themselves amidst the ruins. They had been captives in Babylon, taken as slaves by the conquering country and exiled from their homeland, their promised land. But now, decades later, Babylon has fallen; Persia, a new empire with a new king has taken over and offered to the Israelites the opportunity to leave the foreign shores. Finally they could return home, place their feet on the land where their ancestors stood, and be a part of the heritage that God had given them. So they took the chance, and left the normalcy, the predictability of Babylon to which they had grown accustomed and returned home. They returned home, not knowing what they would find, and not knowing what has happened in their absence. And what did they find when they arrived? Not a hero's welcome, not a shining city, not a New York City ticker-tape parade, but ruins, crumbling buildings, and toppled steeples. Like Europe after World War II, Jerusalem was a fallen city, left to lie still for 80 plus years, overgrown by weeds and left unattended. Those that returned did not have the means, the people, or the resources to rebuild it. They dreamed while they were in Babylon of returning to their chosen land, of returning to their glory, but those dreams were shattered, those dreams fell like confetti at their feet when their eyes fell upon the work ahead of them.

How could this tattered city be the place of God's glory? How could these broken, beaten people be God's chosen ones? Maybe they made the wrong choice; maybe God did not want the Israelites to return to their homeland; maybe Babylon was the next place for the people of Israel to be God's people. The biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, speaks of the yearnings and the desires that the Israelites may have felt for stability, and acceptance by the world's standards. Living in Babylon gave them that sense of stability and normalcy, and the false hope in Babylon as the next chosen place for the people may have become the temptation for the Israelites. Babylon stood for the kind of world power and success that many longed for, even as they despised their captors, they admired them at the same time for the power they had achieved. And, as they were finally sent home, as they were finally released from that great and powerful nation by Cyrus the Persian king, some may have looked back with a yearning to have the

stability and predictability that they knew even as they were in exile. The fallen city which they were to call home only encouraged that yearning all the more. Yes, the Israelites were finally allowed to return home, free from the oppressive rule of a foreign country. They took the chance to return home, but when they found themselves amidst the ruins and rubble of their land, they found themselves saying, “now what and is this worth it?”

Have you ever found yourself with hope dashed at the site of a fallen city, in your own lives, wondering, “Why?”

We have just passed through the Christmas season, a time which calls us to put more effort and energy into our faith and religious practices, along with other parts of our lives. We decorate the church a little more, we have one or two extra services, and we pack as much into the few weeks before the holiday as we can. After all, we are excited about the coming of Christ, aren't we? We are excited about the promise that Christ carries: Wonderful, Counselor, Prince of Peace, and Savior of the World. These are bold and hopeful titles which offer a new life that we all yearn for. The dream of Christ's entrance holds a much greater promise than a new computer, and don't you find a part of yourself wishing that you could buy into that dream with naiveté and innocence of a little child? Don't we wish that the promise of Christmas could come true? Don't we wish that the words, “most wonderful time of the year,” could be changed around to the “most wonderful year of the times?”

Yet Christmas has past, the confetti from the last party has fallen and we look around and wonder, “What has changed?” We look around and wonder if the promise has come to past, if our energy has amounted to something, or if the gray January skies are harbingers of our gray lives to which we must return as we pack our lights and our decorations. Our life is still the same life that it has been, and now we have the extra work to put away boxes, new presents, clean up from parties, pay off the credit card bills we have acuminated, and face the harsh realities that we may have ignored during the “most wonderful time of the year.” It would be easier to go through the motions of Christmas, knowing that nothing is going to change when the season transpires. It would be easier to stay in exile from true faith, and not offer our fullest hope to the ideal of the birth of Christ. The realities of life all come back a break our dreams of hope and comfort that the birth of Christ offered.

Maybe you can relate to this experience in your church. Think about the church universal. It is an institution that is based solely on the promise of Christ invoked every year. It is an institution that holds its hope and existence on the return of Christ with glory and grace that could happen any day. Yet here we are, 2000 years later and we find ourselves trying to convince others that the church does have something to offer to the world. We find ourselves trying to convince others that becoming a Christian, taking the chance and joining a church, and sacrificing time, resources and energy to the Lord will make a positive and noticeable difference in their lives. We try to plead, persuade, scare, or manipulate, or anything else to increase our numbers and bring people to Christ. But what hope do we have to offer to the here and now. Maybe it would be easier to give into the trends and temptations of the larger churches.

There is a false hope, a Babylon which the church can turn to. This is a pie-in-the-sky hope that looks to the future and ignores the present. We look to tomorrow and ignore today. Nothing will change now even when you join the church, but salvation later is yours we often say (in more ways than one). The Liberation theologians of Central America critiqued the church of Europe and the Americas because they offered a Christ in heaven, without seeing and speaking to the sufferings on earth. And so the woman who is struggling to feed her children may look at the “promises of Christmas, and wonder “why.” The man who is struggling to make enough money to feed his family may look at the promise of Christ and wonder how that will change his life in the here and now. The church that is trying to survive on a promise and a hope may look at the effort that just worshiping on a Sunday morning takes and wonder “why.” Think of all of those hundreds of thousands who have died, and the hundred of thousands more who have been affected by the recent natural disasters. Where is hope for them? Where is promise, where is the effect of Christmas? O where is the promise of Christmas for the mourning? O where is the promise of Christmas for the starving? O where is the promise of Christmas for those who are in suffering and despair? This promise land, this walk to Jerusalem does not offer the dreams that we aspired for, and so with the Israelites at the edge of a fallen city we find ourselves saying, “why, what now, what has changed?” A future hope does not ease the present pain.

Enter the words of the prophet.

The prophet comes to speak words of encouragement today. The prophet comes to speak words of hope in the here and now. The prophet comes to show what indeed has changed. The prophet Isaiah calls the people to lift up their heads out of their place of sorrow, look around and realize that God has not left them. Listen again to his words: “arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Arise, shine and see that it is God who is making you shine. Do you hear what the prophet is calling the people of Israel to do? He is calling them to stand up, to lift up their heads and realize the glory which is surrounding them. He is calling the people to embrace the glory and the grace that God has already and is still raining upon him. Look at the freedom you have, cries Isaiah. Look at land that you can again call your own. Look at the ways in which God has already saved you, the ways that God has already brought glory upon you. A small country, sandwiched between empires has survived – this is God’s glory. A small gathering of people who hold little political and military power has returned to its land – this is God’s glory. Your sons and daughters are brought together, your family is united and this is God’s glory. The light of the Lord has fallen upon you, and this light is life, this light is salvation, this light is God’s glory!

The prophet is calling the people to remember their own stories of salvation, stories of deliverance from Egypt, stories of walking around Jericho, stories of great kings of David and Solomon. As Brueggemann also suggests, the prophet is calling the people to remember their past, claim the hope of their past, and then see how God is still active in the present, the here and now. They lift up their heads and look around and realize how God is still a part of their lives. In the movie, *Saved*, a young evangelical Christian girl gets pregnant trying to save her boyfriend. As events unfold things seem to go from bad to worse as her friends shun her and she begins to question her own faith. Yet she finds new friends who are willing to accept her for who she is, love her and be with her through what will be a very difficult time. God was still with her, and God’s glory shone as true friends who could offer her real comfort entered into her life. In the same way, Isaiah is crying to the Israelites that God is with you in the here and now, and your hope will be known in the here and now. The prophet is calling the people to lift up their heads and realize that God is present in their lives.

In the same way we are also called to lift up our heads and realize that life has changed. The prophet is calling us to look around and see the way that the light is shining in our lives. The prophet is calling us to celebrate the ways in which God has brought us out of exile and into the promise land of life and light. We are challenged by Isaiah to reach out, and grab a shard of our broken and forgotten dreams, and then to trust in God as we continue to do the work and maintain the commitment that we have started. This isn’t just counting our blessings, or taking note of the good things we have in life. No Isaiah is calling us to be aware of things which cannot be numbered, tallied, or noted. Isaiah is calling us to be aware of the way in which God is present in our lives in the here and now. It is looking for the light of God shining in your life. It is the small and the large ways, noticed and unnoticed.

When I worked primarily with youth this was a lesson that I had to relearn again and again. The emphasis of the church culture was upon numbers, events, and new members through my ministry. Yet the phone call at 11:00 at night from a distressed youth, and the quick flash of trust from a teenager who had trusted no one were the lights of God shining through. These are moments which cannot be recorded or tallied. These are moments which you cannot plan for or contrive. These are not blessings that can be counted but experiences which can be shared. These are the moments when God has been present in my ministry.

Look at this church. Too long has it been in exile from the world, struggling, questioning, and searching, but we have returned. We have so much to do you may cry. We can look around at all the work we need to do – at the hope of Christ which we need to offer to our community, at the hope of Christ which we need to offer to ourselves, at the infrastructure, the systems which need to be tended to, and the physical plant which is demanding our time and attention. We may look at all that we have to do and say to ourselves “it is to much... we are still in exile.” But I echo the words of the prophet and call you to look around at the ways in which God is active here and now. Just in the past six months that I have been here lives have been changed because of this church. Just in the past six months that I have been here I have seen God’s light shining into the pews, into the halls, and into the lives of people who search for

hope and salvation. People have stopped in here looking for hope, received hope, and we may never see them again – but that is the light of God shining. God is here, right now, and we are already saved.

Look at your life. Look at the ways in which God is already active and moving in your life. Someday I will call for a testimony, and I am positive that people can line up to share the ways that they have experienced God. It is in the small, simple things like notes offered, words shared, and simple acts of kindness, and it is always after that we realize it was God acting. God is in our lives, challenging and changing, and already saving.

This is what the theologian C.H. Dodd calls a realized eschatology – experiencing the fullness of the salvation in the here and now. And that is what the prophet is calling for as well. We still have work to do, we are still looking to go forward and reach that time when our light will shine in the darkness, but in many ways it already has. If you have accepted Christ, then you are saved, and that salvation is experienced in the here and now. Lift up your head with the Israelites, and see the light which God shines upon us.

So we must believe that something has changed with Christmas, and that something changes each Christmas. For Christ is effecting all of our lives in ways we can and cannot know. Sometimes we see the changes, sometimes we see the ways God works and sometimes we don't. We must believe that we are blessed by God, and we are doing and being the church we are called to be. And that belief is what we must rest upon as we continue to try to be the church, embracing all of the work which we have to do. Like Marlon Brando in the end of *On the Waterfront* walking into the warehouse barely able to maintain consciousness as he walks, we must persevere in doing the work of Christ. We may only be able to take one step at a time, we may be so tired that we can only take one step at a time, but we must keep on towards the goal – sharing Christ with the world, and keep to the hope that each step we take will take us just that much closer. And in the process, let us claim the ways in which God is changing, shining, and working in our lives. Don't let other churches, don't let other Christians tell you how you are supposed to experience God – that will lead us backwards. Instead claim the ways God chooses to affect, challenge, and change you – and you will be that much closer to glory. Be bold and be authentic in celebrating the salvation of God you experience today. Arise, shine and know that God is shedding the light of life and salvation upon you. Know that God loves you, and that you are no longer in exile, but here, right now in the promised land.

AMEN