

Epiphany 3 January 2021

Isaiah 60, 1-6

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. 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. 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 And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

Dear sisters and brothers,

This is a wonderful text, but it stems from a time that was everything but wonderful. Israel had returned from exile, to find Jerusalem in ruins- the temple was destroyed, as was most of the glorious city. The fields and vineyards had to be started from scratch. The people were close to giving up, or had already done so. This is the situation into which these words from Isaiah 60 were spoken, words of hope, of light, words promising that God would be making a new start!

Today, as we celebrate Epiphany (the real date is 6 January), we see many connections to the gospel reading from Matthew 2. Perhaps most obvious is the mention of gold and incense in both. But there is more: the magi saw a star, light from above, which they followed. They represent the nations from afar coming to see the glory of the Lord.

As with Isaiah 60, the events in Matthew 2 happen in difficult times for Mary and Joseph. Far from home, this young, inexperienced couple has to cope with the birth of their first child, in poverty, and (they don't know it yet) in a few days will have to flee to Egypt to save their lives. A wonderful event in difficult times!

As we hear these texts today, we too find ourselves in exceptional and

difficult times. We are not attending a church service today, cannot join others in singing: “Jesus, our Saviour, of true joy the giver” and other joyful hymns, but have to make do with virtual services or even just reading this sermon in silence. The text is beautiful, the time is tough!

Personally, I had to prepare this sermon whilst we are having our annual eEquip retreat - this time also as virtual event. Because of the 2020 Lockdown experiences we chose “Desert experiences” as a theme. Yesterday, during the first two sessions, we looked at desert and wilderness experiences in the Bible. It was striking to see how, time and again, God uses these “desert times” as opportunity to start something new. In fact, often times of new beginning and new life happened as a result of difficult times. Some of these difficult times were the result of human failure, others not. But regardless of the cause of these, it seems that God time and again uses them as starting point for something great! It is as if, when we give up, God is saying: Hand it over to me! Let me now do something special!

If you listen to the promise in Isaiah 60, it sounds amazing. Yet it seems as if we humans battle to accept such a promise! We want to be in charge, we want to decide how the way forward should look, how things should develop. Of course, we want God to be part of this, to bless what we are doing - but his blessing must conform with our thinking! If, in time of crisis, we are no longer able to control, to decide, to act, we find it difficult to believe that God can now act more than ever! We become frustrated, angry or despondent.

Today (and also during the eEquip retreat) we are invited to take a different approach towards the Corona crisis. This difficult time is an opportunity to let go - to let go into the hand of the Lord! When I can't see a way forward, it does not mean that God too cannot help anymore. On the contrary - now he can really get going!

We don't know for how long the Corona Crisis will continue. I know that some people still believe that we do not have a crisis, that it is a lie - despite the hospitals in some areas overflowing, doctors and nursing staff working

double and triple shifts, and close acquaintances of mine having died from the complications. I know that many others are close to breaking point because of the harshness of the crisis. And then there are the lucky ones who have not been affected, who don't have friends who have been affected, and who are irritated that their freedom is curtailed because of some stupid rules and regulations.

Today we are invited not to debate on whether the crisis is real or not, whether the measures taken are realistic or over board - rather we are invited to ask: How is God at work in this time and in these circumstances? Isaiah 60 does not speak about what the people must do to change things, but rather speaks about what God is doing to usher in a new period.

Let me slightly reword a passage from Isaiah 60: "See, Corona covers the earth and strict lockdown is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you."

I pray that my eyes will be opened, so that I can discover where God is at work, where he is preparing something new, rather than me trying my level best to cling to what has been. I pray that I will sense that God is moving forward, rather than me trying to move, without knowing where to. I pray that I will start seeing where God is moving.

The magi had seen the star, studied the scriptures and travelled hundreds of kilometres, convinced that they would find a great king. Herod and the scribes in Jerusalem had all the knowledge and could direct the magi to Bethlehem, right at their door step, but they themselves did not see the star, did not go to meet the newborn king. They were so close, but their eyes were not open for God's new beginning in Christ.

On the second day of eEquip (today at 11h00 and 16h00) we will be focussing on how God acts in times of crisis, way beyond our imagination. I invite you to log in via Zoom on your smart phone or computer: click on <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83865675655?pwd=NFkrUUJvZFFZYVRNTU4rUlgxejNGdz09> or join Zoom Meeting ID: 838 6567 5655 Passcode: 563389). Should you have missed this, a video will be made available at a later stage at <https://www.nelcsa.net/equip-2021.html>

Today we look back at 2500 years since the words from Isaiah 60 were spoken. These two and a half thousand years confirm that God, time and again, made use of tough times to start something new and wonderful, especially when his people could no longer see a way forward.

Jesus, when he was on earth, showed that he is an expert in turning hopeless situations around, and turning messed up lives into a blessing.

We are living in difficult times, but "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you"

Since Christmas this glory of the Lord has a name: Jesus Christ. He has not given up - rather, he is making something new!

In this crisis time many things will come to an end, will not survive. May our eyes and hearts be open for the new things, the new paths that the Lord is preparing!

Amen

*Horst Müller, Bishop NELCSA Email: [hmuller@nelcsa.net](mailto:hmuller@nelcsa.net)*