

“Arise! Shine!”

Sermon: Year B, Feast of the Epiphany

Texts: Psalm 72, Isaiah 60:1–6

Preached: January 6, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from God, the Mother of Light, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, the True Light that has dawned upon us, full of grace and truth. AMEN

So here we are at the beginning of a new year. It’s a time for resolutions, right? Did any of you make resolutions this past week? Or maybe you’re like me, and you’ve resolved to stop making New Year’s resolutions, because they seldom, if ever, get kept for more than a short time. But in spite of my skepticism about New Year’s resolutions, I think that ritual exists for a reason. We humans have a need to mark the passage of time, to stop periodically, to step outside of time if only for a moment, to look backward and to look forward, to assess where we’ve been, to acknowledge where we are, and to express our hopes for what will be. This is a season in which we do a lot of that. In some ways, January 1 is kind of an arbitrary date for doing that, though, isn’t it? And in some ways, it’s an odd date for it. Here we are, in the middle of the darkest, most barren time of the year, a time for many of us when we’re not feeling particularly optimistic or hopeful, a time when the lush, green time of spring and summer seems so far away, both as a distant memory and as a distant hope and expectation. It’s a “middle time.” But maybe, just maybe, that’s the very best time of all for stopping and looking backward, and looking forward. Maybe we do that best when we’re in the “middle times.”

Different cultures have had different times and different rituals for marking the passage of time, for looking back and looking ahead. In ancient Israel, one of those moments was at the anointing and coronation of a new king, and then each year, on the anniversary of the king’s anointing, an elaborate festival was held to commemorate that event. Time was counted not so much by a consecutive numbering of years since the creation, but rather by counting the years of the king’s reign (“in the fifth year of the reign of King Uzziah,” for example), because the king represented their identity. And people would gather in Jerusalem, on the steps of the temple, and they would celebrate the events that had come before and look forward to what was to come because of the reign of this king. And they would pray for God’s blessings both on the king and on themselves and on their land.

It isn’t obvious from the psalm we sang a few moments ago, but it was one of the songs that was sung every year on the temple steps as the people marked the years of the king’s reign and prayed for him and for the nation, because the king personified the nation. Listen to the psalm as it was written, and try hearing it as a prayer for the nation. And listen carefully to what is being prayed for.

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. [...] May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. Because he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight. Long may he live! May gold of Sheba be given to him. May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all day long. May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the tops of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field. May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May all nations be blessed in him; may they pronounce him happy. Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.

In this polarized time, it’s hard to imagine praying for those in political authority. Maybe we should try it, if this is what we’re praying for! Maybe on the day that the new Congress is sworn in, or on the day of the State of the Union address, we should be praying for God’s justice and righteousness to reign in how they govern our land. Could that be a resolution? (Whoops, I said I wasn’t going to do that anymore!)

Now, it's important to recognize that the people didn't pray these things in this psalm because that's the way things already were. They were praying for them because that was how they longed for them to be. They knew in praying this way that there was *not* justice and righteousness all around them. They knew that the cause of the poor was *not* being defended, that the needy were *not* being delivered from their need, that people *were* being oppressed. They knew that there was *not* peace. But each year on that day of commemoration, they resolved and prayed that these things might be, that they might come to pass, that they might become the constant reality, because they knew that this kind of justice was God's own desire for them.

So when the early Church began to read the psalms through the lens of their experience with Christ Jesus, when they recognized him as God's Anointed One, as their ruler, as the king who would rule on David's throne forever, this particular psalm became one that expressed all of their hopes and expectations for what the rule of King Jesus was ushering in: a time of justice, not in the sense of judicial judgment, but in the sense of relationships throughout society being set right; a time of righteousness, when people would act toward God and toward their neighbor in ways that honored and lifted up; a time of defending the poor, feeding the hungry and clothing the poor as they called out for aid; a time when everyone's needs would be met, and not those of just a few; a time of ending the oppression of the powerful over the weak; a time of abundance when the land would be carefully tended and would become productive, and not be exploited; a time when people would flourish and thrive in the cities, joining together with one voice in blessing the God of Israel who had provided all of these things through God's agent, the Anointed One, the Mashiach. And these blessings are not just for themselves, the chosen people of Israel. Indeed, they are blessings that are announced for *all* peoples, of every nation and tongue. That's what is represented by all those kings of various nations coming and bowing down, and bringing tribute of gold. And the nations come to this Anointed One not because they have been conquered, but precisely because the Anointed One is acting with justice and peace, and is bringing good news to the poor and the oppressed. The nation is honored for its justice and kindness. Those are God's own values for society.

And that's why Matthew, in his gospel, tells this mysterious story of people coming from the East, from the "place of the rising," literally, to offer these gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. That story is meant to ring in our ears and bring to mind this psalm, and with it, to bring to our minds once again this vision, God's vision, for what the world is to be because of this child, this Anointed One. That story is intended to remind us that Christ, our Light, our Star, has arisen, has shined upon us in our darkness, and that there is hope for justice and peace, there is hope for the needy in all of their needs, there is the possibility of the flourishing of all people everywhere. And on Epiphany, the day of the Appearing, when we hear this psalm, this day becomes our commemorative day, a day for hope, a day for resolve that this vision will be our own vision, a day of giving thanks for God's abundant providing for all people, a day for committing ourselves to this vision.

And we hear once again those words of Isaiah, "Arise! Shine, for your light has come!" God's new day has dawned on us, God's reign of justice and peace has begun. But notice one thing: That sentence is not a description, it's a command: "Arise! Get up! And go shine, because your light has come!" There's work to do! We are the ones who are commanded to shine in the darkness of this world, reflecting the light of the Good News to all those in need, to all those who sit in darkness. We're not just to bask in the glow of Christ's light, enjoying its benefits for ourselves. In our baptism, we too have been anointed as God's priestly kings and queens, appointed to act with justice and mercy and peace, to provide for the poor, to work to end oppression wherever it is found. This is not a day to sit passively and look around and bemoan the way the world is. It's a day of vision, a day of looking at what God is already doing to bring these things about, a day of looking forward with hope to what God is going to do. And dare I say it? It's a day of making a resolution that we will be part of causing God's justice and peace to reign, all because of this humble child, this Anointed One, the Bright and Morning Star who has dawned upon us. Sisters and brothers, arise! Shine! Your light has come!
AMEN