

Isaiah 60:1-6 There Is Yet More Light

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

After the week we have had, surely today's text must feel like a mockery to you. Well, at least it does to me. Last week, we experienced a shocking, but not surprising, insurrection and attempted coup at our nation's capital. Persons who not only supported the sitting president, but were willing to resort to violence to prevent the certification of President-Elect Biden's win in the 2020 election came to the Capitol building armed with firearms, including assault-style weapons, pipe bombs, bear spray, flash bangs, and Molotov cocktails. They erected a gallows on capitol grounds for those they wished dead. They thronged to the balcony area, sometimes scaling the building's walls, and pushed past law enforcement into the building, which is the first mass breach of the building since the War of 1812. They ransacked and robbed offices, broke windows, fired weapons, smeared blood and feces on walls and statues, and left a trail of mess and mayhem behind.

It was a traumatic event, but if the last five years have taught us anything, it is that we should have expected this to happen. I have been grieved and disgusted by what I saw in our nation's capital. When rioters wear clothing symbolizing white supremacist hatred and bloodlust, we should all be outraged. What's more, reports said the first flags to enter the chambers of Congress were the Confederate flag and the Christian flag. Both flags are repugnant to me. Yes, I said both flags. The first should be obvious. I remember, as a girl, asking my father what that flag meant (he had one in his room). He said it meant we were proud of our West Virginia heritage. Given that West Virginia was the last slave state admitted to the Union, that is not a history I'm proud to claim, but rather one with which I must reckon. The Christian flag has come to reflect a brand of theopolitical nationalism that is complicit in the events of last the last several years, culminating in the attack on the capital. It does not reflect the faith I know and seek to emulate.

The insurgents this week seem to be wedded to a particular blend of conspiracy theory and white privilege that is astounding in both its magnitude and entitlement. I have been especially heartsick at the comparisons of these thousands of rioters to Black Lives Matter protestors from the summer of 2020, the former who were met with police in full riot gear and who were tear gassed and shot with rubber bullets, the latter of whom took selfies with Capitol Police.

I joined my friends and colleagues of color in being shocked at the very few arrests made on site for what seem to be clear violations of federal law. There were no rubber bullets used for crowd control. No tanks rolled through the streets of our nation's capital as they did for Black Lives Matter last summer. The differences were glaring and painful. I also found it interesting that, given the overwhelmingly male crowd, the one person shot and killed by police was a woman. If you believe a citizen acting unjustly with consequences is the same as the state acting immorally with no accountability at all, you are making a false equivalency, and false equivalencies are a false witness.

These thugs shouted obscenities and slurs at Capitol Police and other LEO. They threatened—overtly and covertly—the future of our democratic republic. They claimed God was on their side, and they would not be stopped. Yet there is a marked between God being AT our side, or what I often refer to as the always-alreadyness of God's presence, and God being ON our side. We can be assured of the former at all times. We can be assured of the latter only when we also on the side of the widow and orphan, the disenfranchised and oppressed.

This week our text comes from a people who also found themselves mystified at what their country had become. It was depressingly fitting that the attempted coup happened on the day of Epiphany, a day when a "shining forth" is meant to come into our world. Oh, a bright

light shone, to be sure, but it did not light on an innocent, beloved child. Instead, it laid bare the soul of this country. And maybe, like the gifts of the Magi, this, too was a magnanimous gift. Maybe it offers us the space to reflect, to rumble, and to reckon with where we are as a nation.

In today's passage, the forlorn returnees find themselves in despair and discouragement. Instead of returning from Babylon to a peaceful homeland they'd heard tell about, they found the home of their grandparents' bedtime stories instead turned to ruin and left in decay. The Babylonian empire took the best, most qualified, richest individuals into captivity, leaving those less capable behind. How were those left behind to run the government, educate the children, mind the spiritual and physical health of the community? Their buildings were crumbling, their authorities were corrupt, and no one cared much about the state of things.

It is in the middle of this devastation the prophet speaks a word of hope. I imagine when third Isaiah gave the oracle, the people who heard it were left in stunned silence. How else could you look at the devastation around you and proclaim that the light of this people in this land had come? It would have been unfathomable. And yet, the prophet speaks:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Now friends, we need to talk about the darkness/light metaphor. Last week, we heard about how Wednesday was a "dark day" in our country. The metaphor is problematic for many reasons. If there was no darkness, you would never see the stars, nor find a natural rhythm of rest and waking. Further, it equates darkness with badness. When a "dark day" is conflated with a bad day, we begin to pathologize darkness. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book called "Learning to Walk in the Dark," the premise of which is that we often fail—refuse, even—to see the treasures of darkness. She writes, "I have learned things in the dark that I could never have

learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.”

In a society that drew most of its metaphors from the natural world, darkness and light is a metaphor that was easily understandable, but for us today, equating darkness with badness and light with goodness is problematic for other reasons. Isaiah was written before the social construct of race existed, so certainly the prophet would never would have expected his words to be used to degrade people based on their skin color. As the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney wrote this week, “Today was not a ‘dark day.’ Today was a white day. One of the whitest days in American history.”¹ White privilege is breaching the nation’s capital when Congress is in session and living to tell about it. White privilege is the rioters being told by the President of the United States, “We love you. You are very special.” White privilege and nationalism have been trying to overtake Christianity for over 400 years in this country, and the fact that White Christianity is so easily equated with these kinds of behaviors is proof of how effectively the faith has been hijacked.

Isaiah’s vision is of a place where all persons come together in safety. We don’t live in a nation like that today, but the vision is a lovely one. The text goes on:

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

1. <https://twitter.com/WilGafney/status/1346986959638556673>

Isaiah is asking his people to look at the rubble and ruin around them and dream of something else. He's asking them to catch a vision for the way things could be, the way God wants them to be. If this prophecy is to be fulfilled, it will mean a reversal of history. Here in the between times, the people must be inspired by and work hard for a vision that is, as yet, out of their reach.²

In the UCC, we believe there is yet more truth to break forth from God's holy word. This affirmation by one of the founders of the Congregational tradition assumes the primacy of the biblical text as a source for understanding the Gospel of Jesus Christ.³ It recognizes the bible still speaks to us in our current condition. It recognizes that the interpretation of scripture is not limited to the things that have always been said because, as Heb 4:12 says, the word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged-sword.

For that, we are grateful. We need the word of God to divide between joint and marrow, to pierce between soul and spirit, for it is here the reckoning can happen. It is here our intentions, our loyalties, and our idols are laid bare before us. We may choose the way of God, or the way of evil. We must repent of our complicity in white supremacy and theopolitical nationalism. We must repent of conflating those things with the way of Jesus. We must repent of calling for unity without first calling for, and engaging in, repentance. There is yet more truth to break forth, to be sure. May we be bold enough to call sin what it is. May we be humble enough to repent of our complicity in systems of evil and oppression. And may we be hopeful enough to rebuild from the rubble a nation where all may live in safety. Amen.

2. Katherine C. Calore, *FOTW B*, vol. 1, p. 537.

3. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Robinson-English-minister>

