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Isaiah 60:1-6

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning, in Christ Jesus, we pray, Amen.

Do you notice how God doesn't take away the darkness? Darkness as black as night on Gabriola. It strikes me every time I go out in it, how thick and mysterious the dark is. The lights of Christmas are still out there shining in the darkness, offering little messages of hope that the darkest days have passed and the light is coming back a little each day. God doesn't take away the darkness but brings the light. This is not a string of Christmas lights that will soon find its way back into a box . . . this is not the light of the sun that turns winter into spring. This light is not even on the visible spectrum. This light is an inner light; a light God shines through us to light the world.

Isaiah does a beautiful thing with his writing to invite us into his vision. He says, "Raise your eyes and look about." Look around at this future that God promises you. Can you see the landscape? Can you see the people? Can you feel the joy? Can you see the world transformed?

These words are healing for a people coming out of exile; they aren't sure after years that feel like punishment, where they stand with God. Isaiah's words assure them that they are still included in God's story. Not only that, they are essential. God doesn't take away the darkness . . . God brings light to the world through God's people.

I saw Marcus Borg speak a number of years ago. He said something I'll never forget. He said, "without God, we can't; without us, God won't." He was telling us God wants partnership with us; God wants us to be invested in God's story of creation. God wants our participation in the salvation of the world. Without God, we can't; without us, God won't. 'God won't' is pretty challenging for me. But what it says (to me, at least) is that God's work in the world is not magic; it's grace, it's mystery and it's grounded in the world. It's always the trinity at work. One of my seminary professors put it nicely: Where the Holy Spirit moves at the will of the Father, the Word becomes incarnate in history. It happened with Mary when she learns she will become pregnant: the messenger says "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy."¹ Mary says yes, let it happen as you say, and she praises God. Where the Holy Spirit moves at the will of the Father, the Word becomes incarnate in history.

God becomes incarnate for a reason, to be physically in the world, to teach us in ways we can understand, that our eyes may be opened and we may be free to praise God and serve joyfully. God's way is together; God's way is embodied; God knows the only way to truly change the world is to get into the world; the only way to transform the world is through God's people. Arise, shine, for your light has dawned. As you behold, you will glow; your heart will throb and thrill. And nations shall walk by your light.

As God's light dawns on us on the eve of Epiphany, Isaiah proclaims this message not just to the Hebrew people, but to all. Isaiah proclaims to us that as God's people, we too are essential to God's story. Let's just try that on for a moment . . . what if you were essential to God's story? How does that feel? Maybe exciting, maybe scary, maybe confusing. Does it change anything for you? What if we, as a congregation

¹ Luke 1:35

were also essential to God's story? What if God's light dawns on us as a unique gathering of Christ's body in the world? Then perhaps we should look together at God's call for us and our mission in the world.

How do we do that? How do we know what God wants us to do? While God's broad vision for God's kingdom is universal, it manifests uniquely in each community and context. And so first we listen to the voice of God in scripture and in the world around us. God speaks in creation, in poetry, in the words of a stranger, while we cook our breakfast or have our morning coffee. Has a thought ever just popped into your head and you somehow know something . . . or have an epiphany? We listen to the longings of our heart and our curiosities. We listen to our response when we see injustice in the world. God speaks so profusely in our lives, it's hard to know where our consciousness ends and the Holy Spirit begins.² The star speaks of glorious news and the wise ones are listening.

We listen and we share. This week our visioning team will begin hosting conversations with all of you. It is an invitation to talk about our congregation, about God, about experiences of the past and hopes for the future. The visioning team has discerned . . . at length . . . questions for discussion:

First off, we wonder, why church? Church is a conscious choice. Why have you chosen to make church a part of your life?

The next question is about God. We can't know precisely what God wants, but what do you imagine God wants? When has Christ Church or any church come closest to what you imagine God wants of us? Perhaps you have a story to illustrate.

We're also curious about life on Gabriola and how Christ Church can deepen relationships on the island. What are your thoughts about what that relationship could be?

If you looked ahead 20 years, who do you hope Christ Church will be? What is your dream for our church?

We expect you have thoughts to share that don't necessarily answer one of those questions, and we want to hear those too.

We're not looking for correct answers or scholarly opinions; we want to hear your voice. When all the conversations are complete, the visioning team will discern and then invite all of us into the discernment of God's voice in the midst of all we offer. We pray that we would emerge with a call that is clearly us, one that illustrates how well God knows us, how much God values us and our participation in God's story.

Can you see it? Christ Church Gabriola living her vision? Raise your eyes and look around at the future. Look at the people . . . watch them in their work . . . they are bringing our dream to life. Thanks be to God!

For Those Who Have Far to Travel

An Epiphany Blessing

If you could see
the journey whole
you might never
undertake it;
might never dare

² Mike Raschko

the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping
step by
single step.

There is nothing
for it
but to go
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:
to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;

to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions
beyond fatigue
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.

There are vows
that only you
will know;
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,
make them again:
each promise becomes
part of the path;
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel
to offer the gift
most needed—

the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.