



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
5 January 2020
Sermon: Be Radiant
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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.

Matthew 2:1-12 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Subterfuge and homage; violence and worship; joy and fear – contrasting reactions to the birth in a manger. On the one hand, priestly figures from the East, gentiles who study the stars, observe an astrological event in the heavens announcing the birth of a redeemer. They bring him gifts and offer their reverence. In contrast, in the halls of power, Herod, the puppet vassal king of Rome, while claiming devotion to this Messiah, is in reality filled with fear. Fear of what? Fear of insurrection, of being supplanted, fear of losing his power and wealth. And so he schemes to destroy the Christ child.

Have you, lately, noticed the Christ child's star in its rising? Has its flame lead you away from what you have known, from what you have expected, from what has been safe and secure? The night sky of my youth was brilliant. I come from a deeply rural part of the state, over an hour from anything that could be called a city. When I looked up to the stars, the night dazzled with light. You could trace the Milky Way from one horizon to the next, that glow of countless stars illuminating a path across the night sky. Not so much here, anymore. I looked out on a clear night earlier this week from my back porch in Weaverville. Light pollution makes it so you only see a handful of the most prominent stars. They dot the sky, here and there, but they hardly fill it.

Perhaps it has been that way for you, in your life. Have recent years dimmed the light pointing to redemption, pointing to wonder, to God's holy mystery? With a few days off and grandparents visiting to watch Joseph, I had a bit more time than usual to read the *New York Times* editorial page this week. Russ Douthat told me that we had just lived through "The Decade of Disillusionment." Paul Krugman advised me that "Apocalypse [Has Become] the New Normal." Gail Collins asked me if I'd "Already Had Enough of Trump 2020?" I did see Nicholas Kristoff's contrasting headline that "This has Been the Best Year Ever," but by then I was too sad to read any further.¹

How are you feeling at the dawn of a new decade? In 2020, it is easy to feel pessimistic, if not outright cynical. The year begins with climate crisis staring us in the face; fires race across Australia. In the coming months, we will surely see the most divisive, negative, vicious

¹ Ross Douthat, "The Decade of Disillusionment." *The New York Times*. Dec. 28, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2Zv8Dag>

Paul Krugman, "Apocalypse Has Become the New Normal." *The New York Times*. Jan. 2, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/37zhhQj>

Gail Collins, "Already Had Plenty of Trump 2020?" *The New York Times*. Jan. 1, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/2ZJc65h>

Nicholas Kristof, "This Has Been the Best Year Ever." *The New York Times*. Dec. 28, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2MBGkBL>

campaign season and election of my generation. Violence against the most vulnerable in our country is on the rise. And in just the last few days, hawks are beating the drums of war again in the Middle East. Is there a star left guiding you to the manger? Or are we all just left with the Herods?

Of course, Scripture gives us a more complex picture. It is not one or the other; Herod and the magi appear together. Their stories intertwine. A light shines in the darkness. Light within darkness; darkness within light.

Yoely Greenfeld hovers behind an outside table on a cold New Jersey evening, wearing the thick black coat and hat of his Hassidic community.² Standing next to his rabbi, he lights first the center and then the candle farthest to the side, marking the first day of Hanukkah. He is surrounded by members of his community, mostly men and children. In the distance, a New Jersey police officer looks on at the celebration, his hands clasped reverently at his side. In the picture I saw, there are no smiles. Everyone is solemn, determined, reverent, as the lights from the menorah brighten their faces on a dark street. This evening and this place hold tragic significance for Mr. Greenfeld and his community. Two weeks earlier, in the middle of last month, his sister Mindy was shot and killed along with three others in a hate-filled rampage there at the kosher supermarket she owned.

The Talmud teaches Jews to light the menorah and to place it outside or in a window, as a way of witnessing to God's love and fidelity, but they are exempt from this mandate when there is imminent danger, such as times of persecution. In a recent Washington Post editorial, another

² See Andrea Salcedo, "Hanukkah in Jersey City after Terror Attack: 'Good Will Always Win.'" *The New York Times*. Dec. 22, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2EKmcJl>

Rabbi asks if Jews in America are living in such a time of danger today?³ Just last week, only a few days after that cold evening celebration in New Jersey, a man broke into a Jewish home in New York while the inhabitants were celebrating Hanukkah. He wounded 5 worshippers with a machete. Nationally, anti-Semitic attacks are rising exponentially. Charleston, Poway, Pittsburg, now Jersey City and upstate New York are just a few of the most well-known sites along a string of attacks on our Jewish brothers and sisters in recent years.

But, in that Washington Post editorial, the one that asks if Jews should hide the menorah during this time of rising violence, the Rabbi says no. Now is not the time to put away the lights of the faith, the lights that proclaim God's faithfulness. She says, "When we blaze brightly and bravely in the world, we publicize the miracle that has happened and fight to bring one yet to come... We show that we can stand together against hate with everyone feeling afraid now. We help warm a world when it might be feeling cold. We must all shine out, together, big and bright." And so they have, and so they do. Today, in fact right now at this very moment, on the streets of New York, Jews and gentiles alike are marching in solidarity against rhetoric and acts of hate.

A light shines in the darkness. Light within darkness; darkness within light. Do you see it? The light shining out at the beginning of a new year?

Last week, Asheville made the national news when a mural at Static Age Records, just a mile down the road from this church on Lexington Ave., was defaced on Christmas Eve.⁴

³ Dayna Ruttenberg, "Hanukkah Calls Jews to Light the Darkness. This Year, We Need it Even More." *The Washington Post*. Dec. 18, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/12/18/hanukkah-calls-jews-light-darkness-this-year-we-need-it-even-more/>. Note: I am thankful to Rev. Cynthia Keever for posting this article on her Facebook account, where I first saw it.

⁴ Brian Gordon, "Downtown Asheville Mural of Pop Star Tina Turner Vandalized with Apparent Swastika." *Asheville Citizen Times*. Dec. 26, 2019. <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2019/12/26/nazi-swastika-graffiti-tina-turner-mural-asheville-record-store/2750674001/>

Someone destroyed a beautiful rendering of a young Tina Turner, painted in blue and yellow and black paint on the garage storefront. Someone tagged the mural with an eight-foot-long swastika done in purple spray paint. It wasn't just vandalism; this was a hateful act, directed at a beautiful portrait of an artist of color. The store made a go-fund-me page to raise money for a new mural. On that page, the owners declared their store "a widely inclusive outlet for artistic expression" that will not tolerate any "hate of any form." The go-fund-me-page raised over two thousand dollars, with the extra money now going to Southern Poverty Law Center.

A light shines in the darkness. Light within darkness; darkness within light. Right here, in our very midst.

Lastly, in just a few hours from now, we will celebrate the life and witness to the resurrection of Alice Schmitz, long time member of this congregation. Alice was a person of great faith, who worked tirelessly, often unacknowledged and behind the scenes for this church and this church's people. Those of you who knew her well know that in her last years Alice often spoke candidly, without trepidation, about death and about God. Once while visiting her at the Baptist home, I told her of the death of someone she knew well, someone who, like Alice herself, had felt the pains of aging, loss, and dementia. And Alice, she didn't even pretend to put on a sad face. She smiled as I told her the news, and, not in a macabre or an ironic way, but in sincerity, and hope. She said, "Good for her." Yes, of course, she said, it is always sad to see someone you love go, but good for her.

You see, Alice set her eyes on God in her final years. Not that she wanted to leave prematurely. It was more that she knew where she was heading, and she had a trust, in a way that I have rarely seen before, that God would be with her, in life and in death, that God would walk with her through to the other side of this life. And that trust radiated out from Alice. I saw that

trust, every time I visited her. It was in her smile, in her greeting, in the warmth of her hand as she prayed.

Again, a light shines in the darkness. Light within darkness; darkness within light.

Siblings in Christ, the light that illuminated the path to the manger and sowed fear in the violent heart of Herod is in you and me, and it is also everywhere around us. Body of Christ, it is not up in the sky waiting to be discovered. It burns already, and it shines out of us. It shines when siblings of different faiths join hands and voices against a hate that threatens to divide us. And it shines out when we step out in faith into the unknown, believing in the hope of the manger, even when the more “reasonable” thing, the more “realistic” thing, the prevalent and sophisticated attitude is pessimism, cynicism, and despair in the face of this New Year.

Friends, Grace Covenant is never been a place where we ignore what is happening outside these walls, in our lives, our community, and our world. It is a place where we face hard truths together in faith. We do not leave our hardships at the door, nor can we ignore the troubles and pain of this world. We bring our lives, our cares, and our fears into worship; we bring our passion for justice and righteousness, because we trust in a God who walks with us; the God who walks with the broken, the weak and marginalized; the God walks into the unknown when we do not know what lies before us. This God was the flame that lit the way to the manger. Trust that that flame burns within you, in us, and out into our community and our world, now and in the years to come. A light shines in the darkness. Amen.