

Arise and be Radiant!

I've enjoyed following the conjunction between the planets Jupiter and Saturn in recent weeks. Already way back in the summer, they were in the same part of the sky, both of them brighter than any star. Bit by bit they inched closer, until on the evening of December 21, they were the closest they've been since the year 1226, and will be until 2080. At their closest they were separated by only 0.1 degree (one fifth the width of the moon).

Of course their "closeness" is only an illusion painted upon an imaginary one dimensional sky. In truth, Jupiter and Saturn are as far apart from each other in space as they ever have been, approximately 450 million miles. And this separation became a little easier to see when I looked at them through binoculars. Jupiter was clearly the bigger and brighter of the two, which made it easier to imagine Jupiter as also the closer to us in space. Saturn was a bit dimmer in comparison. It's almost as if Saturn standing behind Jupiter, looking over his shoulder. Both bright, both radiant! But Saturn playing a "back seat" role.

I've thought about that. And it struck me as a good metaphor for the Christmas story. John the Baptist as Saturn, looking over the shoulder of Jesus, playing a back seat role. Both of them radiant in their own right, and together forming quite a phenomenon in first century Palestine. Joseph as Saturn, playing a back seat to Mary's Jupiter. Or if Jupiter is the baby Jesus, who else might Saturn be? How about Mary and Joseph, both taking a back seat role now that their divine baby has been born? Or might Saturn even be God's own self, looking over Jesus' shoulder, always in the background as Jesus lived out his mission and ministry. Quietly but continually reminding him, "Don't worry my beloved son. I've got your back."

"Arise, shine!" wrote the prophet Isaiah, near the end of his book and in the latter part of his life, roughly 2500 years ago yet still as inspiring and joyful today as ever. Stand up, cast off your blanket or cloak or chains or whatever is holding you down. It's time to shine! Interesting how Isaiah implies that more than one celestial, heavenly body is shining here, one of them being the referent "you" in verse 1, the other being the glory of the Lord in the same verse.

The referent "you" was Israel. Who had long been held down, first by Assyria, then Babylon. Thick darkness had indeed covered them (as Isaiah says in verse 2), in their case the darkness of their exile, an exile brought about by their own careless disregard for God's Torah. But now the time has come for them to shine again. All they need do is lift their eyes, and they will see that their exile has ended. They will see their loved ones, young and old, returning at long last, loved ones that had been scattered during the exile. And not only that, but they will see the nations themselves, including their enemies, coming, attracted by Israel's brilliance, bearing gifts of camels, and gold, and frankincense.

No surprise that this text from Isaiah has resonance with the Christmas story. Israel being told to arise and shine, because the "glory of the Lord," now represented by the Christ child, has come to them. And it's not hard at all to see a connection between this text and the verses from Matthew that talk about a star rising in the east, a bright star that led the magi to the infant Jesus. Bringing their gifts of gold and frankincense. No camels, apparently, but Matthew added myrrh to the mix.

Today is known as Epiphany Sunday, the day on which we celebrate the coming of God's light to the world in the person of Jesus. And so we've had lots of references to light and brightness in today's service, not just in the Scripture lections but in the hymns we've sung. And the candles we've been lighting since the first Sunday of Advent take on particular importance on Epiphany.

But what if Isaiah was addressing his words to us as well? What if we are now the ones Isaiah is commanding to arise, to cast off the blankets and cloaks and chains or whatever is keeping us down, and to begin shining anew? What if it is now us that the glory of the Lord has risen upon?

Darkness has definitely been covering the earth, right? Thick darkness. The year 2020 was surely once of the darkest ever. The coronavirus pandemic. The virus of racial unrest, and the virulence of racism in general. The dark divisiveness in our world, and especially our nation, separating one human being from another, not just in Washington D.C., or Portland, OR, but here in Hillsboro. And if we're honest, here in our own church. We've felt the darkness, haven't we? We've caught the virus. We've experienced the divisiveness.

But now, Scripture commands us to arise, shine, and be radiant.

But, Isaiah, how can this be? We're not stars—just cold, aging planets, circling endlessly around one. What do we have to shine about? The pandemic's still here. We can't go anywhere or do anything (at least anything fun). The holidays are past, which means we now have to go back to work. Or worse, school. Hard to say which is worse: work or school (shall we take a vote?). Either way, it's the same old drudgery. Nothing more to look forward to, except the grey, cold, cloudy days of January and February. I don't know about you but I feel just flat out of light.

But then Isaiah reminds us. It's not our own light we are to shine with. It's God's light. The light of faithfulness, and justice, and especially love. It's the sheer glory of the Lord, which has once again risen upon us. All we have to do is reflect it. Like a mirror. Or how about . . . like a planet?

It's as if . . . we are Jupiter. Radiantly reflecting the sun. And behind us, just off to one side, no more than a degree or two, is Saturn. As if Saturn is the Christ. Beaming over our shoulder. Quietly reminding us, "Don't worry, my beloved one; I've got your back." And seen together, we're downright phenomenal.

The closer together we come to Jesus, the more aligned we are, the brighter and more radiant we become. You could even call us—each one of us—a Christmas star!

Amen.

In response, there are all kinds of great songs we could sing. Joy to the World, for instance. Or Bright and Glorious Is the Sky, which is a great Epiphany song. But after the bulletin had already been printed, I thought of another song. One written by Patty Shelly. Based on these very verses: Isaiah 60:1-6. It's called "Arise, Shine!"