

The Gift
Celebration of the Epiphany of our Lord
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Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Ecclesiastes tells us, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build.” Many blessings in our life are connected to what feels like a curse. A lesson our scriptures for today show us is that the same can be said of hope. Hope is not given to us to make us feel optimistic. In fact, I would even say that some true hope does not feel good, it feels like a threat.

I learned this quite acutely in June of 2010. Two days after my son’s 13th birthday and 4 days after Father’s Day, I separated from my husband. This was bar none the hardest decision of my life. Though we had reached the point where it was healthier to split up than to stay together, I carried great lament and shame for being the one to decide to forever fracture my family. This decision didn’t feel hopeful, it felt dangerous and wrong. I felt I was destroying my kids; I was convinced of it. Though I was charged with providing these two precious young people security and love, I felt I was choosing brokenness and wounds for them. I did in that moment what I thought was the best in an awful situation; I found a therapist to work with us.

I remember bringing them to their first appointment. Sarah walked into the waiting room to introduce herself to me. She looked to be about 15 years old and I remember thinking “what on earth can this person, still a kid herself, tell me about parenting?” We walked into her office and I scanned the walls to make sure she had actually had a school diploma and a license. After meeting with me and my kids for 45 minutes, where we unloaded all of our dirty little family secrets on her, Sarah took me aside. She looked me dead in the eye and said “I want you to know something. I know so much of this probably feels hopeless right now, but this brokenness is a sort of odd-shaped gift. So many parents strive to protect their kids from pain, but your kids have the unique opportunity

to learn coping skills and gain wisdom that might otherwise take them years to learn. Keep showing up and talking to them and your kids will turn into resilient, strong, and successful adults.”

I was speechless. This wet behind the ears, young therapist whom I had dismissed spoke a solid nugget of hope for me. Those words got me through the hardest season of my life and even still anchor me today. God choose this unlikely woman to be a star pointing me to the work of restoration. She was hope when all I felt was hopelessness.

On a much grander scale, this is what is happening in Matthew and Isaiah. In Isaiah, the Hebrew people are trying to rebuild their lives after having been exiled from their land. They have lost their livelihood, culture, and identity and are in the midst of lament in not knowing how in the world they will rebuild.

And then in Matthew, the Hebrew people are now under Roman occupation; the ruler of their country a sociopath. Their nation and way of life are so enmeshed in oppression that when foreign magi with no understanding of their religion walk about 500 miles to Jerusalem and say to them “Hey guys, did you know that there is this really strange star in the area? We are pretty sure it has something to do with a baby born that is to be your new king”, they miss the significance of what they have been waiting for so many years and instead respond in fear.

They are even given a second clue, when Herod calls up a few of their religious leaders and asks *where* their Messiah is to be born. The scribes and pharisees don’t need to go back home and do an internet search first. They know their scriptures so acutely that they immediately quote their own prophetic scriptures to Herod, knowing that it will happen in Bethlehem. The Jews are in the midst of such abject hopelessness that their word of hope did not feel like hope, it felt like a threat.

How many of us today experience hope as a threat? Last week, I was listening to an interview on NPR with author Linda William Jackson. She spoke of her own upbringing in the civil rights era. Her family opted to not get involved in the civil rights movement, never speaking of Emmitt Till or Martin Luther King JR. at home, because they were so afraid of change. Hope doesn’t always feel like hope, it feels like a threat.

People often ask why domestic violence sufferers stay with their abusers, and while these situations are incredibly complex, sometimes staying in the status quo feels safer than an action that might risk greater harm, even if action can mean freedom. Hope doesn't always feel like hope, it feels like a threat.

Where are the places you feel hopeless and threatened? Have you told yourself that your addiction to food, alcohol, or your smartphone is just the way it is and that there is no joy-filled life without them? Does our nation feel broken beyond repair and you feel resigned to just letting things play their course over these next 4 or even 8 years?

I believe Isaiah has some powerful words for us.

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

2 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.

3 Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 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.

5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,

Sometimes all we have is risking the next step, no matter how hard or senseless it might seem. Because our God declares light when we are still sitting alone in darkness. It is arising when we want to lie down. It is calling up a new therapist even if she looks 15 years old. It is calling the Center for Women in Transition phone number when you want to explain away the bruises again. It is speaking up for the bullied girl being mocked in the hallway, when you risk being disliked or worse bullied yourself. It is calling a city council woman or your senator, even as you tell yourself "my small voice is just a drop in the bucket". Bit by bit by bit,

as we choose the gift of hope given to us through the work of a simple infant son raised by peasants a couple of millennia ago, we share in a work that moves from hope to a new heaven and earth. Bit by bit by bit, we shall see and be radiant; our hearts will thrill and rejoice. Amen.