

27 January 2019
The Third Sunday after Epiphany

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Run or Rejoice?”
Text: Luke 4:16-30

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Imagine a place that is cold and silent toward pain and human suffering. Try to envision a place where everything is driven by self-indulgence. Life is all about financial profit, business transactions, and the bottom line. Countless people are being dehumanized. In this place there are no prayers, liturgies, hymns, or sermons. Mercy is a rare commodity. Where is this God-forsaken place?** Some big city filled with driven people? A communist country that has outlawed religion? The 21st century American public square? Actually, it is where the prophet Isaiah lives. It is 8th century BC Jerusalem. It is the world Isaiah describes in the last 11 chapters of his book.

The leaders (56:10), he says, will not call this community to “maintain justice and do righteousness” (56:1). The so-called watchmen who should be doing this are in reality “wild beasts” (56:9) and “dogs” (56:10-11), more intent on the next party than divine correction (56:12). There is idolatry (57:3-13a), the people are not being called to repentance, they fast for a show but show no mercy, there is fighting and violence (58:4), slavery (58:9), accusations (58:9), and lying (58:10). And that’s just for starters . . .

For Isaiah then goes on to describe just how cold-hearted this community really is in his 59th chapter - one of the darkest chapters in all of Scripture, filled with all kinds of words describing the darkness: iniquity, sin, defilement, deceit, wickedness, disorder, vanity, turmoil, violence, evil, destruction, devastation, and crookedness. And what of justice, salvation, and righteousness? They are far, far away, Isaiah says. And God is, as you might guess, appalled. No one is intervening. No one is stepping up. No one stopping it. It’s the new normal in Israel. And it’s very, very dark indeed.

But then Isaiah gets to chapter 60 and he changes his tune. *Arise, shine, for your light has come (60:1)*, he says. We heard those words on the day of Epiphany. Light is coming into this deep darkness. And today, we hear, it comes in a most unexpected way, and in a most unexpected place - it comes in church, in Nazareth. It comes when one Sabbath, one of the sons of Nazareth, a boy who grew up there, is invited to read the Scripture appointed for that day. He unrolls the scroll of Isaiah, finds chapter 61, and reads the words we heard today:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

*because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

And then he says - he, Joseph's son, named Jesus - he says: *Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*. Or in other words, into a dark and evil world, He is the one intervening. He is the one stepping up. He is the one who came to stop it. He is the light that has come to shatter this darkness. That there be a *new new normal*. And not just in Israel, but in all the world. A *new new normal* of mercy, forgiveness, and righteousness.

The people in Nazareth thought that was pretty cool. They always knew God would come through for them, and they liked hearing it from the mouth of one of their own. *Until*, that is, Jesus started telling them who the poor, the captive, and the oppressed were. That it wasn't them! And He starts listing Gentiles . . .

We only hear of two - I wonder if Jesus was going to go on. But as if to show the truth of what Jesus was saying, instead of repenting, the darkness spews out from within them! Filled with wrath, they rise up and drive Jesus out of the town, and would have thrown Him down the cliff to His death if Jesus hadn't left. He *would* die, and at the hands of His own people. But not here, not now, not like this.

But you see, that's the thing about the light. You don't know there are cockroaches in your kitchen until you turn the light on. And you don't know the extent of your sin and just how deep the darkness in your heart until the light is shined on it. And that that description of 8th century BC Israel could indeed be a description of the darkness of our world today, and of the sin darkening our own hearts as well.

So you can get mad, deny your sin, proclaim your innocence (or your at-least-not-as-bad-as-the-next-guy-ness), and toss Jesus and His Word out, like the people in church at Nazareth that day . . . or you can repent.

If you do the first, you can go on living your new normal. Honestly, you'll probably get along better with the world, and when you die everyone will say what a good and nice person you were (even if you weren't), as you begin your new life of eternal darkness.

If you do the second, though, and repent, then you become one of those people Jesus came for. The spiritually poor He has come to make rich. The blind to whom He has come to give sight, to see things as they really are, as God sees them. The captive to sin that He has come to set free, and the oppressed He has come to fight for. For when you repent, Jesus says to you: *I forgive you all your sins*, all your darkness, all your failure to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. I forgive you! Go, you are free.

That's the kind of freedom and life Jesus has come to bring. The people in the Nazareth of Jesus' day didn't know of such freedom. To them, religion had become all about dos and don'ts, what you could do on the Sabbath and what you couldn't - man-made rules trumping mercy and love. People were treated as commodities - they were bought and sold, owned and used, and then thrown away. Like they were going to throw away Jesus, when He wasn't the kind of preacher they wanted Him to be.

Maybe not. But He was the kind of Saviour they needed Him to be. A Saviour not just for some, but for all. Not to confirm you in your sin, but to bear the sins of all, to die for the sins of all, to call all to repentance, and to proclaim and give forgiveness to all. A Saviour to provide a great freedom that would last not just for a time, but forever. A great freedom to live no matter who you are or where you live. A *new new normal*, which we see after the church is anointed with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Peter and the others went from being confused, denying, and frightened, to preachers and baptizers of great boldness. For they had been set free to forgive and serve and mercy and love. Free in Jesus who had done all this for them. And for you.

Now, did you catch the last line of the Gospel today? It's kind of easy to overlook; just a tiny detail. But it's more than that, I think. ***But passing through their midst, He went away.*** Do you realize what a sad statement that is? Jesus was there, for them, but they didn't want Him. Not *that* Him, anyway. So He went away. Left. He had gifts for them, but they didn't want His gifts.

And Jesus has gifts for you. He has come here to this church, today, and has spoken to you. And not only spoken to you, but shined the light of His love upon you, washing you, forgiving you, feeding you, life-ing you. You, when you're poor because you've spent your life chasing what doesn't last. You, when you're captive to your sinful urges and desires. You, when you're blinded by the glory of this world and deafened by the so-called wisdom of this world. You, when you're oppressed by satan, and by others satan uses in his oppressive regime in this dark world. ***Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*** for Jesus is here with all His gifts for you. To shine upon you. To proclaim to you a year, a lifetime, an eternity of the Lord's favor.

For this one here for you, yes, is Joseph's son, but also the Son of God. The anointed one. The light of the world. The Lamb of God come to offer Himself as the sacrifice for your sin. The healer of lepers, the provider for widows - the source of *every* blessing. Come to bless you. To shine upon you.

And having been so blessed and having received such gifts, anointed by His Spirit in your baptism, you now get to live these gifts and give these gifts to others. To the poor, the oppressed, the captive, those in need of mercy. To live this *new new normal*.

It might not be easy, though. You might not be staring down a cliff with hands ready to throw you off it, but the light of forgiveness does shine a light on sin. A life of mercy does shine a light on oppression. Proclaiming the truth does shine a light on what is not true. And nobody wants to admit there are cockroaches in their kitchen! But when the light goes on, the truth is revealed . . .

So know that, but don't let it stop you. For God has created you, redeemed you, sanctified you, and put you where you are for this. To live this *new new normal* life. It is, as St. Paul says, a *more excellent way*. It is the way of love. The love of God for you that has filled your heart, raised you to life, and set you free. And though the road be tough, the rewards few, the need overwhelming, the resources scarce, and it be easy to get discouraged by the darkness, *don't*. Not even when staring death in the face, or staring down the steep sides of a newly dug grave. For just as with Jesus, so our graves, too, will one day be empty, when your Lord who passed through death to life again, passed through the darkness to light again, comes again to raise you to life and light again. When the darkness of sin and the darkness of death and the darkness of evil will be forever scattered, overcome, and banished, and there be only light and life forever.

So *Arise, shine, for your light has come*. That's the message of Epiphany. The message proclaimed by Jesus that day in Nazareth. The message proclaimed here. Don't be a cockroach and run from the light! Arise! Shine! Rejoice in it and grow in it.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

[* The words in italics in the first three paragraphs of this sermon are quotations or very close paraphrases from the article "A People Mover: Yahweh's Servant in Is. 61:1-3" by Reed Lessing in *The Mercy of God in Cross of Christ: Essays on Mercy in Honor of Glenn Merritt* (St. Louis: LCMS, 2016), 35-45. Some other thoughts in this sermon were taken or derived from that article as well.]