

“Flip the Switch”
Isaiah 60:1-6
Rev. Kelley Becker

My friend, Brenda, was the type of person that never said a negative word about anyone. She was kind and compassionate; she never gossiped, nor did she participate in conversations that included gossip. She was also the proverbial glass half full person. She was able to see something good in every person and in every situation she encountered. Brenda died about 4 months ago. She had three grown children, a grandchild, and a husband who all loved her dearly. She was easy to love. When I wrote to one of her daughters, I said, among other things, “Your mom was a bright light in this world and in my life.” I didn’t say this part, but if I’m honest, the world really seemed a bit darker in the days following her death.

I could tell you a lot of stories about her, but the one that comes to mind first is about a Bible study group we participated in together. The night I came to the group and shared with them that my first husband and I were divorcing is seared into my memory. I asked them to pray for me as I figured out what the next season would be like. And, instead of that, one after another of them told me divorce was not God’s will. They had no idea why we were divorcing. Anyway, amid their lecturing, Brenda, who disliked conflict, disliked unkindness and hypocrisy more. She looked at me and said, “I’m sorry you are going through this. I love you and God loves you. What you need is not scolding, you need love and pie.” She stood up, took my hand, and we left. I never returned to that group. Brenda did. She forgave them and moved on. I forgave them and moved on differently. What she did for me that night was shine light into darkness.

I found myself thinking a lot about Brenda this week as I prepared for this sermon series in which we hope to “shine a light” on what we are calling “the blahs,” winter blahs or otherwise. For many of us “the blahs” are related to short days and long nights. This time of year, some of us go to work in the dark and come home in the dark, which means we can go days without actually stepping into the sunlight. Whether we actually experience SAD, this physically dark season takes a toll on our mental health and our dispositions. We need light. When we don't get enough sunlight, our bodies don’t create as much serotonin or vitamin D. Doctors at Cleveland Clinic say serotonin plays several roles in your body, including

influencing learning, memory, happiness as well as regulating body temperature, sleep, sex drive, and hunger. Lack of enough serotonin plays a role in depression, anxiety, mania and other health conditions. Lack of vitamin D causes fatigue, bone pain, muscle weakness, muscle aches, muscle cramps, and mood changes.

I remembered this week that Brenda's favorite flower was the sunflower. You probably know, all sunflowers begin the day facing east. They wait to greet the sunrise. Early in the summer, while they are small, sunflowers follow the sun all day. As the sun moves across the sky, sunflowers turn too, always facing the light. But as summer turns to fall and the sunflowers get big and ripe and heavy with seeds, they stop turning and face east all the time. Brenda was a lot like her sunflowers. She was always turning toward light, and in turn, she reflected that light into the world. It wasn't that she didn't see the darkness of the world. She saw it and wasn't afraid of entering into it as she showed compassion to friends, family, and even strangers who were experiencing the darkness that accompanies illness, grief, loss, heartbreak, and addiction. Brenda believed with her whole being that darkness would not, in the end, win.

The text from Isaiah Anna and I read today comes from a time and place very different from ours, but it reminds us that we are not the first people to experience a world in which darkness seems to cover the earth. Isaiah 60 is part of Third Isaiah, which encompasses chapters 56-66. Rather than being the voice of one prophet, scholars believe this prophecy came out of the Isaianic school, a school of disciples dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the prophecies of first and second Isaiah, speaking them into a new context. In fact, there are several passages in Third Isaiah that are almost direct citations from Second Isaiah (including the text for today (Isaiah 49:12, 18)).

Third Isaiah is rooted in the sixth century BCE as the exiles from Babylonia returned to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, a major conflict had arisen between those who remained and those who returned. Living conditions were extremely difficult. Jerusalem was in ruins. The people were now divided again, not against some outside threat or enemy, but among themselves. The group associated with the Isaianic school were on the margins of power. They were a small group. It is possible that they were embattled against those who had a much more narrow, exclusionist understanding of what it meant to serve God. In Third Isaiah, for example, even foreigners and eunuchs could serve at the altar.

To really understand today's text, it would have been helpful to read the two chapters before this. Chapters 58 and 59 are characterized by gloom, despair, and a call to repentance ("the ways of the wicked are crooked, our transgressions are many, our sins testify against us"). They are also marked by a yearning for light and glory to come ("we wait for the light but there is only darkness").

If we had that, the opening line of Isaiah 60, "Arise, shine for your light has come," would have seemed like a floodlight into complete darkness. What we should notice is the abruptness of the shift from doom and gloom to light and glory, specifically, the shift in God's response to the people's "crooked ways" and their sense of despair: they are not to mend their ways first (out of fear), rather God comes, God erupts and interrupts, God arises and shines! The glory of God is God's presence.

Something new was coming: hope. And there would be something new for them to do: hope. And it would be completely connected to the presence of God. It would be like a bright shining light, breaking into the darkness. This light would appear to people who had equated their darkness and hardship to the absence of God. All they had hoped for in their homecoming would come to be. Families would be reunited. The poverty and shame of exile would be overcome when people from all over caravanned their wealth into Jerusalem. And this would be a sign that God was dwelling with them again. That last part about wealth being a sign that God was present is icky to me, but it partially explains the popularity the prosperity gospel enjoys in the United States. What the text really is saying, though, is that God's presence provides abundance. They would finally be whole.

Most of us who believe in a Divine presence don't believe that God's presence is here and not there or withheld based on our behavior. But that doesn't stop us from experiencing darkness, feeling alone, tossing and turning at night, struggling to get out of bed in the morning (especially now, since all of Bartlesville has new pillows). We do not expect God to swoop in with all of God's glory and fix it for us. This text reminds us that there is something we are to do, we are supposed to "arise" and "shine," expecting that, even if we can't see it yet, the light will come. In other words, be a sunflower. Wait expectantly, hopefully, on the light to come. Turn toward it, knowing the dawn will break. But also, recognize there is light

within each one of us. Inside each one of us, there is beauty just waiting to shine forth into the world.

This week at Pub Theology, we talked about rituals. And we wondered what the difference between ritual and routine is. We decided rituals cause us to feel something important, to feel grounded and connected to something beyond ourselves-the earth, other people, for some of us, God. Rituals, we acknowledged, have something beautiful about them. And beauty is important. Not made up beauty, but natural beauty that springs forth from everything that breathes, grows, and lives.

For the ones who believe God is the Creator of everything that lives, we understand that beauty comes from the God light inside each one of us. But wherever you think that beauty comes from, it's our job to look for that light in one another and refuse to accept that people who have different beliefs, values, skin colors, genders, orientations, and traditions than ours don't possess the light. The light always exists. It exists in all of us. And sometimes the darkness we feel around us happens when we forget to see the light and beauty, not only in other people, but inside ourselves.

Truth be told, we have a lot of help forgetting. My favorite song right now speaks to that, it's called "Victoria's Secret," by JAX. What you need to know to appreciate this song is that Victoria's Secret is an American lingerie, clothing, and beauty retailer known for high visibility marketing and branding. Their "brand" is very specific about what beauty is. In a recent interview, when asked about the song, JAX said it comes out of her experience being influenced by the brand when she was a young teen. She said, "Without thinking critically about the fact that the images were photoshopped and many models had undergone cosmetic surgery, I began to cut down calories and developed an eating disorder." Now, she sings, "I stopped eating, what a bummer / Can't have carbs in a hot girl summer / If I could go back and tell myself /When I was younger, I'd say, "I know Victoria's secret / And girl, you wouldn't believe / She's an old man who lives in Ohio."

The point JAX hopes to make is that "the image and the attraction of Victoria's Secret is not a natural creation, but the vision of a man who purchased the company in the early 1980s." She highlights "the problematic relationship many have with the owner and the company as she sings, "Making money off of girls

like me / Cashing in on body issues / Selling skin and bones with big boobs / I know Victoria's secret / She was made up by a dude (dude)."¹

The capitalist culture, that made the owner of Victoria's Secret rich, is powerful, and for some, dangerous. And it is just one way the world encourages us to forget our natural beauty, to forget that light inside each one of us that enables us to "arise" and "shine," even when our lives don't seem so shiny, like when we are anxious or depressed, when the winter blahs or any blahs have us feeling anything but hopeful. The text tells us to "Lift up our eyes and look around..." Maybe we aren't being encouraged to lift up our eyes to heaven, but to lift up our eyes and look around at each other and pause long enough to notice the light within all of creation.

We can't fix capitalism or any other ism, or the mistakes we've made, or the trauma we've experienced with a sermon series, but I do think we can begin to do some things to care for ourselves and each other. Whatever your life is like right now, no matter how dark things seem, I promise you, the light will shine again. There are some easy practices we can use to coax our inner light out so that it can shine in this world. One of those practices comes from our text today, ARISE.

***SAD/Scripture Slide**

You may be wondering how getting out of bed can be a spiritual practice? Well, maybe the spiritual practice isn't only getting out of bed but getting out of bed in order to bear witness, like the sunflowers, to the daily gift of the rising sun and reflecting on how easy it is to miss those fleeting moments or to take them for granted. God's glory dawns over us day after day; sunrise after sunrise. For the days when we can all agree it is sometimes difficult to get out of bed, we can remember that every morning we are offered a glimpse of a miracle we can count on daily: the light! The splendor and abundance the biblical writer proclaims when he talks about streams of camels and frankincense and gold, "wealth of nations and the abundance of the seas," none of it, no amount of anything money can buy, even begins to compare to the gift of the fresh start the sunrise brings us each and every day.

This week, you are invited to create a "ritual upon arising" that will work as an easy and memorable thing to do to start your day with a bit more light and more

¹ https://en.as.com/latest_news/victoria-secret-jaxs-new-song-and-the-man-behind-the-brand-n/, accessed 1/21/23.

lightheartedness. In your bulletin (or if you are worshiping online, in the comments of this broadcast), there is a card with some suggestions from experts on one side and words of encouragement on the other. First, figure out where you will perform this ritual—perhaps at the mirror or coffee pot or simply at the side of your bed or near a lamp you turn on each morning. Use the ideas from our experts to help you decide what your “ritual upon rising” will be. Place the card in the space in which you will practice your ritual, as a reminder to “Arise and shine...” and to greet the new day with hope.

I wish you had known Brenda. If you had, I would end by telling you to talk to yourself like you would imagine Brenda was talking to you. But maybe you have a friend like her. See yourself through their eyes. Talk to yourself as if you are beloved...because, dear ones, you are. And be the kind of person who is always looking for the light in other people. Let us be for one another light and love. “Arise, shine, your light has come.” Amen.