

WGUMC January 6, 2012 "Arise, Shine"
Isaiah 60:1-6 and Ephesians 3:1-12 (from *The Message*)

Paul's in prison when he writes to the people in Ephesus, but his message is clearer when we read it in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. That's why you got the paraphrase today, because it's important to be clear. After all, Paul's life work is "helping people understand and respond to this Message."

[Peterson, Ephesians 3:7]

That's my life work, too. Maybe that's why I had to spend so many years in college and graduate school, because I couldn't help others understand what I didn't understand. Some of us are slow learners. Like Paul, I was "the least qualified of any of the available Christians," so "God saw to it that I was equipped, but you can be sure that it had nothing to do with my natural abilities." [3:8] If you knew how shy I was, how tongue-tied and doubt-filled I was as a teenager, you'd know what I mean.

"And so here I am, preaching and writing about things that are way over my head," trusting that the Spirit will help you to hear in my woefully inadequate words something of God's Word, something life-giving about "the inexhaustible riches and generosity of Christ." [3:8-9]

I'm in over my head every Sunday, but especially on this Sunday, the Feast of the Epiphany. The word *epiphany* means "revelation," and that unfortunately doesn't describe the average sermon. No, the epiphany we're talking about is the revelation of a Jewish guy named Jesus to non-Jewish guys and gals in the Gentile world. In Peterson's words, Jesus was an insider who offered salvation to outsiders. And what Jesus did, Paul took up doing. And Paul showed us that what the least qualified of anyone can do, we can do, too.

Figuring out how to help others understand and respond to the Message: that's our life work. And on February 10th, when Rev. Schuyler Rhodes from Temple UMC in San Francisco

comes, we're going to learn how to make that Message

"accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board."

[3:6] One of my goals for this new year is to help you witness to your faith, and Schuyler is coming to do that. He was voted the best preacher in San Francisco, and I happen to know that he is one of the best leaders in our Annual Conference. That's why I've invited him here to teach us some authentic, non-threatening, welcoming ways of sharing our faith with insiders and outsiders.

But some of you will say to me, "How can we share something we're not sure we have? How can we help others to understand something we don't know much about? When so much of our lives we've been groping around in darkness, how can we help others to see the light?"

The Prophet Isaiah lived among people whose whole world had gone dark. They had turned away from God, given up on the covenant. They had engaged in all kinds of injustice. So

they practically invited the Babylonians to invade. But when they were carted off into exile, they were not only taken away from their homes and their homeland, they were also ripped away from the spiritual center of their universe. The Jerusalem temple was The Place where the presence of God was most powerful, most tangible, and that temple was destroyed. In exile, they could only pray, "Are you there, God? It's me, Israel."

So when Isaiah talks about darkness covering the earth, thick darkness the peoples [Isaiah 60:2], he's not talking about the cloud cover. He's not talking about skies that are overcast. He's talking about souls that are downcast. Anyone who's been ripped away or has drifted away from their spiritual center knows what he's talking about: not knowing who God is or where God is or if God is and not even sure that you care. And that thick darkness can persist for days, months or even years.

But with a lot of prayer and perseverance, anyone who has turned away from God, can turn back again. And as soon as they do, the cover of darkness begins to lift. The light creeps in and life is an option again.

Isaiah is saying that God is the light that makes life worth living again. And you don't have to do anything but turn your face and let the light shine on you. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

[Isaiah 60:1] Yes, you. That message is for you this Epiphany season. Come into God's presence and be bathed in the light. For when you let God shine in your life, you will shine, too.

"Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice." [60:5]

I've seen that radiance on the face of someone who is six months sober and someone living in her car who finds shelter. I've seen it when the pregnancy test comes back positive and when the biopsy report is negative. I've seen it when the job is

done, when the divorce is final, when the rift is mended, when the burden is lifted. I've seen that radiance many times on the face of someone near death who is waiting to cross over.

Whatever happens in your life that puts you in the presence of God, that's a gift. And God's light shining on you brightens the world for others, too.

So I have a good feeling about this new year and the prospects for God's glory rising upon you. You're not going to let what God is doing in you die with you, are you? No. You're going to shine and if not nations, then friends and neighbors, will come to your light, and if not kings, then co-workers, to the brightness of your dawn. [60:3] Because that, my friends, is precisely how the Good News gets passed on.

It's not only that we're coming out of the darkness of a recession and, as a church, have gotten through a year of pastoral transition. It's not only that we've renewed our focus and improved our finances. And it's not only that we have a

great new web site and are happy to see new faces. This is going to be a wonderful new year because of the rich variety of your gifts and graces.

If I know you, you will bring far better gifts than the wise guys did. Instead of gold, you'll bring your faith in God. When I first arrived here, I was impressed that some of you have a very deep faith. Others have a faith that is just starting to put down roots, and I want to nurture that. So we're going to try to provide you the space and the resources to work on that, so that my heart can "thrill and rejoice." [Isaiah 60:5] You see, I couldn't do this if I didn't see God at work in your life. So, "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

Instead of frankincense, you'll bring your commitment to make a difference. Call it hope. I see it in your 10-years of support for the joint youth program that we will celebrate tonight. I see it in your enthusiasm for the Mexico mission trip.

And most recently, in your passion for the Open Table program.

The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

But I see you *becoming* disciples of Jesus Christ as you work to change your world. "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

Instead of myrrh, an ointment that was used in rituals of death, you will bring love, the balm of life. Next Saturday, I will tell a story about Barbara Stover and her life as a court-appointed child advocate, a surrogate parent, a school volunteer and a friendly visitor. It will be a love story. And just remember that all the love you bring this year and next year and the year after that, all the love that you offer in service to our Lord, that love will someday work its way into another pastor's story. We'll be telling love stories about you. "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

So, forget the gold, frankincense and myrrh. Bring us your three best gifts: your faith, your hope, and your love. Then God's light will surely arise upon us, and God's glory will appear over us. Then God's love will be revealed through us. Amen!