

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Isaiah 59:9-60:3

*"Arise, Shine!"*

Darkness and light are favorite biblical metaphors for evil, sin and ignorance on the one hand; goodness, righteousness, and truth on the other. They are powerful metaphors because they touch a deep sense within all of us that light is better than darkness: if you have ever sat all night beside a sick child, or kept watch in the military, or been camping on a stormy night, you know the relief that dawn brings. So we still talk about people "living in the dark," about "the light coming on," and other such expressions of our deep-rooted and ancient sense of good and evil.

### 1) *We Look For Light*

Isaiah prophesied to people who in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC were supposed to return from Exile in Babylon to a renewed and restored Israel. But it didn't turn out too well – indeed you could say that all the later books of the Old Testament reflect that disappointment, which by Jesus' day had swelled into massive national frustration that "the exile wasn't over;" they were still being ruled by foreigners 400 years later.

What went wrong? Couldn't God do any better than this for his "returned people"? "Surely," Isaiah 59 begins, "the arm of the LORD is not too short to save?" Has the LORD lost his grip, his touch, his reach? No, says the prophet: "your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins

have hidden his face from you." It's not God's fault your society is a mess, and that you are threatened by foreigners; it's your fault!

What is wrong? Almost everything that can be wrong in a society. There is no justice. "No one pleads his case with integrity." "They rely on empty arguments and speak lies." "They conceive trouble." Forgive me if this reminds me of presidential politics! – and not only in America, of course; though we get to see a very large amount of it by taking about two years to run an electoral campaign. Other countries manage it in 6-8 weeks, leaving a little more time to actually govern between campaigns.

But it's not hard to imagine what Isaiah describes: a society where "truth stumbles in the streets;" where "no one knows the way of peace." We have seen it too often ourselves; we are arguably in that state right now. So "We are like the blind; we grope along the wall... at midday we stumble, as if it were twilight. We growl like bears; we moan like doves... justice is driven back... truth is prostrate on the ground. *We look for light, but all is darkness.*"

This is the all-too-familiar cry of the world's great nations, the great cities, and even the people of God. It is "darkness at noon." Just when everything should be about as good as it can be, there are clear signs that it is not so.

It is all too often “the best of times, the worst of times” as Charles Dickens said of the 18<sup>th</sup> C. Arthur Koestler wrote one of the most famous anti-Communist novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. and called it *Darkness At Noon*, showing how at the heart of the Marxist promise of freedom lay a deep untruth that would prove fatal. When the Son of God came to earth, in what should have been the world’s brightest hour, they hung him on a cross and the sun turned black at midday. Darkness at noon.

## 2) *Who Can Fix This?*

So we “growl like bears, moan like doves,” according to our temperament and politics; we ask ourselves how we could have messed things up so badly when we had so much going for us. Like the French, the British, and other recent “empires,” Americans begin to wonder where and when we “lost it,” and why. Of course some new “savior” may yet rise to tell us it is “Morning in America” again, but we sense that they are going to have a harder job selling that to the American public than Ronald Reagan did 25 years ago!

But as Isaiah knew, political solutions are not going to work. “The LORD looks down and is appalled” at what he sees. He is “displeased that there is no one to intervene.” He decides *he must act himself*. So “his own arm worked salvation for him.” He arms himself for the battle against evil with “the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation... with garments of vengeance and a cloak of zeal.” The LORD, the great warrior, comes to save his people from themselves! He will repay the enemies of his people on the outside, and he will bring retribution to the corrupters of his land on the inside.

“*The Redeemer will come to Zion.*” There can be no more pregnant sentence in the whole Old Testament. No human deliverers, no prophets, no priests, no king can save the people. No skilled Persian-trained governors like Nehemiah, no learned biblical scholars like Ezra; no warrior Maccabee families or priestly John Hircanus, will be able to restore the monarchy to Israel and bring righteousness and justice to her land. Only the Messiah, the God-like figure dimly seen and long awaited, will be able to do it.

“*The Redeemer*” will come – Israel’s *goel*. We heard about him back in the book of *Ruth*, when the immigrant Moabite widow was rescued by her wealthy relative Boaz, who paid the debts she and her mother in law Naomi owed, bought back their mortgaged property, and made the needy Ruth his wife. The concept of “redeemer” was an ancient one: it could mean the one who bought back a mortgaged piece of family land; it could mean paying to release a family member from servitude or slavery; it could mean avenging an injury or a murder; it could mean marrying your dead brother’s widow so that she was protected and would have children to continue the family name.

The redeemer was someone powerful, compassionate, and willing to act, even at his own expense, for needy members of his family. Now the LORD himself would be the redeemer for all Israel. No wonder, when Jesus came, they called him “*The Redeemer*” who “gave his life for many.” As Isaiah foresaw, God would act to defeat evil, restore Israel, and create a New Covenant with his repentant people: one in which his gifts of his Word and his Spirit would remain with his people forever – to every generation – and this New Covenant would, as Jesus said, “be sealed in his blood, for the forgiveness of sins.”

### 3) *Your Light Has Come!*

How should his people respond to this great act of God? "Wake up!" "Arise, shine, for your light has come." The "glory of the LORD shines about you" - as Luke said of the sleepy shepherds on the first Christmas night. "Sleepers, awake," says Paul to the Ephesian Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. God has acted in history; wake up to what has happened! Wake out of the darkness, because your light has come!

The Redeemer has come to Zion, and she is now the new "city of God," "the mother of the faithful." Her "sons and daughters" will return to her from near and far, but they will include children she did not know she had - new sons and daughters from "the nations," the *goyim* - that would be you and me! Her children will come, all nations will come, and "kings will bow down at the brightness" of her dawn. The treasures of all nations will be brought to Zion; camels, flocks, silver, pine and fir and cypress; and gifts of gold and incense - as Matthew tells us three Magi brought from Persia. The might and wealth of the nations will be brought in tribute to the LORD, the Holy One, the Savior, the Redeemer of Israel; and all the good things the nations have to offer will be used in his service.

Somehow we know already that Isaiah is seeing far into the future; far beyond Israel's return from the Babylonian exile - much farther, we suspect, than he knew himself. In fact he reveals to us once more that *prophecy seems to have three-fold application*: once to the immediate situation - Israel returns from Exile; once to the coming of Jesus Christ and the world-wide influx of Gentile converts into the Christian Church; and once to a still greater Day yet to come, when all tribes and languages and people and nations (Revelation 4) will be part of God's reconciling work, and his glory will be fully

revealed - when the "new Jerusalem comes down from heaven" and God finally and eternally "dwells with his people" (Revelation 21-22).

So where are we now? Between the second and third fulfillments of Isaiah's prophecy. The Redeemer has come; the King has returned to Zion; sins have been forgiven. So we should wake up, and show the world that *the light has come!* O, to be sure, it's not over yet; again in our day we can still experience "darkness at noon;" "the best of times and the worst of times." But somehow we who have seen the light ought not to be among the ones "growling like bears, moaning like doves." It's no good for Christians to be forever complaining that "the world is going to hell around us." That is not news, and earlier generations probably had a lot more to growl and moan about than we do. People all over the world today have more to growl and moan about than we do!

So when the lights go up all over town, and we hang them on our Christmas trees or round our gutters at home, let's you and me try to remember that Christmas is about the "coming of the light," and that our calling is to reflect the light of Jesus' coming onto other people, so that they will not have to "live in the dark" any more. It will not do for us to "growl like bears or moan like doves." We are to proclaim that "the light has come," that "the Redeemer has come," and live like people who believe that - in all the ways that count, in our families, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods, and at the ballot box. Do not believe the candidates who claim to be your savior, or those who tell you that "all is dark" and that you should be "very afraid." Look rather for ones who "plead their cause with integrity" and do not "rely on empty arguments."

And never forget that *"The Light Has Come."*  
We are not looking for another one; no other redeemer. We are trying to follow our calling to reflect the light of Jesus Christ into the world he came to redeem.

Let us pray...