

January 5th, 2020

Isaiah 60:1-6

Pastor Katya Brodbeck - Powell United Methodist Church

### “Lift Up Your Eyes”

“Light has an ability to travel infinitely with the highest speed and reach the darkest corners of the universe and transform them.” Author unknown.

I was in tenth grade when my dance group visited the city of Yekaterinburg. Yekaterinburg is the city where the last Tsar’s family were executed in 1918. On our dance tour we had time for excursions, and we had a chance to visit a Russian Orthodox Church that was built on the same place where the house where the family was shut used to be. This church is called “Church on Blood in Honor of All Saints” and was built to honor Nikolai the second and his family who were canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church, which means they were recognized as saints and martyrs for being held captive by the Bolsheviks, transferred to Yekaterinburg, and then shut. Through the whole process they were meek and humble. I learnt all this and more on the first level of that church. The first level was more like a museum that showed history, pictures, and even had a room where the family was executed. The first level was also very dark with low ceilings, with not much light. It also felt dark and heavy, because of the photos, and documents that told the story of that murder. I, as a 16-year-old young woman felt that darkness so greatly. Our group was going around that first level pondering and some with tears in their eyes. As we finished with the first level, we slowly started to walk towards the second level of the church. We started to climb the stairs. I remember as I climbed the stairs, I started to see light. And as I climbed higher and higher, everything around me was becoming brighter and brighter, more and more light was coming through. When I finally stepped on the floor of the second level, the light was so bright that it overwhelmed me. It was brilliant, pure, divine and holy light, and I knew that God’s presence was there. God’s glory and God’s love was shining in that place. This divine light enveloped me and I felt like the light was shining through my whole body. As I stood there with my head and eyes up, I heard Orthodox choir singing and I smelled the incense and the wax of the candles. Tears were falling down my cheeks. As I stood there bathing in the light that was coming from many windows of that worship space on the second level of the church that was designed in this way, I thought about murder of the Tzar’s family and all the darkness in the world with politics, killings, inequality, hunger for power. I also realized how much darkness was inside me. Perhaps for the first time in my life, as a 16-year old young woman, I was faced with my own darkness. As if this divine and holy light was touching this darkness and uncovering it. But then light was slowly penetrating this darkness, cleansing and purifying my heart, and tears started to fall even harder, as I was asking God for forgiveness of all my sins and how my actions or inactions caused darkness and pain in this world. I thought of the first level of the church and the striking contrast between the first and second level, darkness and light. Even though darkness exists and might even persist in our

world, the hope and faith is that God's light is shining. Whoever designed that church was a brilliant theologian. As I stood there lifting my eyes up and taking all that light in, I felt like the weight of the darkness was lifted. I felt hopeful. I believed that the light of God was shining and could overcome darkness.

This morning the text from the 60th chapter of the book of Isaiah invites us to lift our eyes, too. The text proclaims that God's light is shining. Most scholars consider this text to be written post exile, when the Israelites were returning from Babylon to their homeland of Judah after a long period of living in a foreign land by force. Those days when they returned were very difficult for them: Jerusalem was destroyed. The Temple was a ruin. Those who stayed in the land during the exile were mostly peasants and small-business owners and merchants. There was a lot of work to be done. The picture was depressing and dark. They needed a reminder that God's light is shining. The Lord God is their light. I would imagine all of this made them weary and would press down on them. And we would know that feeling for their picture was as dark as the picture of our world today.

What is happening now with Iraq and Iran causes us to fear of being on the edge of war. What is happening in our country with a divided political climate causes us to worry about the future and well-being of our country and our children. What is happening in the UMC, especially when it makes national news headlines like this weekend, makes us anxious about our beloved denomination. I am going to pause here and say that I am thankful that pastor Larry sent an e-note about the happenings in the denomination. The mass media provided some incorrect information and Pastor Larry is able to explain all of that for us. If you have not received it and interested, please let us know. You could visit our website, there is a page that is dedicated to the developments post Special General Conference of the UMC. But Pastor Larry is planning to have gatherings soon to talk about the current situation of the UMC and the coming General Conference. And both Larry and I are open to talk to you about it, but as you know, we don't have all the answers.

So, all of these issues and many others, like mass incarceration, gun-violence, homelessness and hunger, our personal darkness, all paint a depressing and dark picture. There is so much work to be done. And it weighs down on us, making even our haze to look down. But if we could only lift up our eyes, the prophet Isaiah says, and see that God's light is shining? If we could only fully give ourselves to this light of God, giving all the dark places in our hearts and in our lives? If we could only fully give ourselves away to the way of light in this world? Wouldn't we change, wouldn't our world change? Wouldn't the light shine in those dark places in our world? The Prophet Isaiah knew that and he wanted to remind those who were coming back from the exile that God's light is shining.

For us, people called Christians, the light is shining in Christ Jesus. We just received Christ's light into our hearts again or for the first time this Christmas, and today, we celebrate Epiphany, even though technically, Epiphany is tomorrow on the last day of Christmas, we chose to observe it today in our worship. Epiphany is the feast of light. The word "epiphany" itself is

translated as “manifestation.” So we celebrate today God’s manifestation of Godself to humanity in Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world, who is pure and holy, full of love and compassion, born to transform us and the world. So, friends, today let us commit ourselves to the way of light and love in this world again, so how we live our lives reflect the light of Christ. Today let us ask ourselves, what darkness in this world do we need to confront? What darkness in ourselves do we need to confront? What changes do we need to make, so our lives are aligned with the way of Light of Christ in this world?

We think about New Year’s resolutions, Mari Kondo and cleaning out our house, a no-buy year, reducing waste and weight, sugars and carbs. But let our New Year’s resolution be our rededication to Christ, to empty ourselves for the way of love and light in this world, to give ourselves fully to Christ’s light. Amen.