

Sermon – January 8, 2023  
Pastor Dan Hollis  
Isaiah 60:1-6

The town of York is of course home to the iconic Nubble Lighthouse—the last lighthouse in North America to be automated, and the picturesque front of countless postcards since its construction in 1879. The federal government built the Nubble in part because of the number of shipwrecks in the area, and now its light can be seen thirteen nautical miles away.

Those of you who consider yourself York natives may already know this, but as a transplant I was surprised to learn recently that one of the images stored on the Voyager 2 space probe... was a photo of *the* Nubble lighthouse. So it's not just *thirteen* miles anymore. Currently the light of York, Maine's very own lighthouse can now be seen twelve *billion* miles away... if there are any aliens out there who know how to crack open a speeding space probe.

Light spreads. That's its whole thing. Light doesn't just sit there on the end of a candle. It *launches* outward from that candle at the *fastest* speed there is. That's why they call it "the speed of light."

And right here on Christmas Eve, we saw what happens when you touch a lit candle to an unlit candle, and another, and another. That light spreads. It doesn't *diminish*—it just creates new light. It multiplies. Each candle becomes its own new light, and together those lights fill the room and pour out the windows into the world beyond.

We talk a lot at Christmastime about a light shining in the darkness: about Jesus coming to this world to be the light our dark world desperately needed. But it's after Christmas now, and that's not where that story ends. Because light *spreads*.

The people of God come to church on a Sunday to huddle around the light of Jesus, to warm our hands by that fire and to see what that light reveals to our eyes as they adjust. But we shouldn't just be ships navigating past a lighthouse... we should be *candles*. Candles that *catch* the light, *become* the light, and by our light draw *others* to us, to light *them* as well.

"This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine," isn't *just* a song about cultivating your own inner light to keep the darkness around you at bay.

*Our* light, the light we feed and we blow on gently and protect from the wind and coax into a roaring flame, it's not just something we shine for ourselves, or even something we use to simply light the *path* of others.

**The light of *God* is the candle that lit *us*... and each *one* of us should be the candle that lights someone else's. We don't just shine the light, we *share* the light. Your life and your joy should be a *beacon* that draws others in, and it should set them ablaze just as *you* are, to warm every corner they go on to reach and every heart they go on to touch.**

Our light should be bright enough... to spread.

Our reading today comes from Isaiah chapter 60, a part of the Book of Isaiah that was—as Sherry reminded us—a beacon of *hope* to the Jewish people following a time of darkness called the “Babylonian Exile.”

In 587 BC, a hundred years after the death of the *first* prophet called Isaiah, the Babylonian Empire *conquered* the kingdom of Judah, *destroyed* the city of Jerusalem, and deported all Judeans into *exile* far from home.

Fifty years after *that*, Babylon is conquered by the *Persians*, the exile *ends*, and the *descendants* of Judah can finally return home. By that time, very few Judeans had ever even *seen* Jerusalem—most had been born *after* the exile began.

What some scholars call “2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah,” the author of chapters 40 through 55, dedicated his *own* ministry to persuading the now-free Jewish people to return *home* to the place God had promised them.

And after *that*, the words of 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah—which is where today's Scripture reading comes from—were directed at the people who had *finally* returned to what was left of their home, and were scrabbling to rebuild.

Out of a time of darkness, Isaiah 60 says, comes light. This was God's promise to the people: if they nurtured God's light, Judea would grow from a place of darkness and loss to a place of *glory*. “For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

God's “glory,” the Hebrew word *kabod*, refers to God's weight and power, *and* God's magnificence and splendor. In Exodus, God warns Moses not to look directly at God's *glory* as it passes by—for no one can see God's *face* and live—but if Moses would hide behind a rock, he could sneak a *glimpse* at God's *back* as God leaves the mountain. So I like to think of God's glory as a blinding *light*—kind of like the *sun*, or those LED headlights on the road that'll get ya killed if you look at them directly.

So in our reading today, I see God promising the people who have returned from exile that the *glory* of God shall set each of *their* lights ablaze... with a light of hope that will draw in all those around them.

“Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.”

*They* are the candles now.

It reminds me of something *Jesus* would go on to say in a few hundred years: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid... let your light shine before others.”

Today is Epiphany Sunday, a Christian feast day that celebrates God incarnate *revealed* in Jesus Christ. The *word* epiphany often refers to a thought arriving like a blinding flash of light, and the *holiday* of Epiphany commemorates the arrival of the Magi come to visit the Christ child, bringing their gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We know from the original Greek of the gospel of Matthew that what some translations call the “three wise men” were a group of foreign priests from a region and a *religion* far east of Judea.

*Magi* were famous for *astrology*. They studied the lights in the *sky*—stars and planets—in an attempt to understand more about the world they lived in. And they were always looking for new information. How does Mars move? Why is it in the same place at certain times of the year? And what’s the deal with stars? Sometimes they move, sometimes they don’t move, sometimes they explode... Do people act differently when there’s a full moon out? Which meteor showers are *dangerous* and which ones are just fun to watch? What does it mean when certain planets line up perfectly in the sky when they’ve never done that before?

*Chinese* astrologers claimed that a *comet* in 524 BC was the sign of a “new broom” to *sweep* away traditions and the old order of things. *Another* comet in 300 BC signaled the “sweeping away of evil.” The Magi of *Jesus’* time were from a region in *between* China and Judea, and they *too* looked to the stars to make sense of the world. And scientists *today* can look *back*, and see that, in the decades surrounding the birth of Jesus, there were *plenty* of exciting lights in the sky.

In the year 12 BC, Halley’s comet shone in the sky for the first time in seventy-five years; in 7 BC, Jupiter and Saturn lined up perfectly in the night sky. In 6 BC *Mars* joined them, and Chinese astronomers recorded two *more* major comets in 5 BC and 4 BC.

Were any of these events the light in the sky that told the Magi the king of the Jews was coming? I have no idea. There are plenty of compelling arguments out there for or

against *any* of them, but the truth is we have no way of knowing. What's important here is *light*, shining in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it. *Light* that lit a fire in the hearts of others, and began to spread.

So when the Magi started seeing *lights* appearing in the sky that had for centuries been associated with change and the cleansing of evil, they paid attention. The stars were telling them that a great king had been born in the west: a king who would change *everything*. So they went to find him, and to bring him gifts that would have been oddly familiar to anyone who had read Isaiah 60. "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."

And the Magi, after *finding* Jesus... were changed. And I have no doubt that they carried the light Jesus lit in *their* hearts back *with* them on the long road home.

And as it turns out, they were right. Jesus really *did* change pretty much everything. Jesus was the light of a candle... that lit *other* candles, which burned so brightly and traveled so far that they drew in *other* candles and lit them, *cultivating* their light, and... spreading.

It was like what happened with the people who returned from exile centuries before. The glory of God lit a *fire* in the hearts of the people in Jerusalem and Judea, and they fed and nurtured their light and shone it into all the cold and dark corners, giving *others* with no hope their *own* light to cultivate.

**That's who you can be. If you nurture the light God lights in *you*, you can burn so brightly and warmly that you can warm the heart of *any* unlit candle you meet. And because of you, *they* will be able to find warmth inside *themselves*, and *light* that can illuminate even... the darkest reaches of space.**

The light of the Nubble burned so brightly that they put it in a probe and threw it into space. How brightly can *your* light shine, and how far will *it* reach?

Show me. Show *God*. Make your candle so bright even *God* can't look at it directly. You'll be amazed who it draws in, and you'll be amazed at what it can do to brighten the hearts of others.

Thanks be to God. Amen.