

Covenant Word

*saying "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How shall we sing the Lord's song in a
foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither! Let my tongue
cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not
remember you, for you Jerusalem are set
above my highest joy! (Psalm 137)*

Living Under a Crazy Star

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

*A Message by
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Pastor
Sunday
January 15, 2017*

*There was no way their child could
comprehend the network of social contacts,
payoffs, barter, reciprocal altruism, petty
bribes, black market, hush money and sheer
idealism of wartime Warsaw.*

This quote comes from Diane Ackerman's recounting of the experiences of The Zookeeper's Wife during World War II in Warsaw, Poland. As the animals of the zoo are steadily shipped away or eaten by German troops, the zookeeper, Jan, becomes active in the Polish resistance while his wife, Antonia, feeds and tends to hundreds of Jewish families and displaced children. She hides them within the vast network of the zoo's underground cages, giving each person a code name that coincided with the animal who once was the inhabitant of the very same living space. With a fatally wounded zoo, Antonia created an indoor zoo that possessed a circus of rituals, odors, and noises. It was her guests' playfulness and laughter that outweighed the constant danger they were all in. Antonia says:

*...living from moment to moment...in a time
of danger and uncertainty...takes a special
stripe of bravery. We were a house living
under a crazy star.*

Thousands of years before World War II, the Jews knew what it was like to garner their courage and live under a crazy star. The Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem and as is true for many war-torn countries even today, the Jews were forced to leave their homes, separate from their families and friends, and begin the life of immigrants carrying only what they could hold or wear into a foreign land. No longer able to worship in their Temple, the psalmist records the Jews' lamentation:

*By the waters of Babylon, we sit down and
weep for we remember Zion. Our
tormentors make fun of us and taunt us*

No more tradition. No more established routine. With faith and ethnicity both at risk, the Israelites wonder how God will keep the promise made to Abraham under a sky full of stars?

Unsure, they decide to very carefully from one generation to the next, to tell the stories about Jerusalem—its beautiful buildings, its amazing resources, its successful commerce and at the center, the marvelous Temple. We can imagine their longing when we have listened to stories that begin with "back in the day..." or when the greatest happiness of anyone's life was back in time. "Those," they tell us, "were the good ol' days."

So when it was time to return home, the Israelites—now several generations removed from the original exiles that none of them had ever lived in Jerusalem—were stunned to view that for which their ancestors had grieved and longed. They returned to a bombed-out city in shambles. There

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was no glory—only a failed economy and towers dissolved to rubble. Disappointed, despairing, what were they to make of the mess Jerusalem was in 580 B.C.? (Walter Brueggemann, "Missing by Nine Miles," Collected Sermons, p. 192)

It is into this disparate situation that the prophet Isaiah enters with promises that everything is getting ready to change. "Arise! Shine!" he says. "Look up! Hope! God is about to do something new!" He continues: "Kings will be drawn to your dawn! The wealth of nations shall come to you." In other words, Jerusalem will become a center for productivity and prosperity. It will be a new focus for international trade. "A multitude of camels will cover you! They will bring gold and frankincense and proclaim praise to the Lord." Specifically, the poet imagines that great camel caravans will come from Asia loaded with commercial goods and spices that will make the beloved Jerusalem, and all of its inhabitants, prosperous once more. This is cause for celebration, because it stands in direct contrast to the


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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

present dysfunction of the city.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that the gospel writer of Matthew and the wise men must surely have studied Isaiah 60, because they knew to come to Jerusalem. They knew to bring spices, gold and frankincense. They knew they would find a new king whose reign would consist of peace and prosperity. And they knew that He would be found under a star of such brilliant light that they would be compelled to follow it.

And so they came to the palace in Jerusalem and asked Herod about a new king. Now Herod's grandiosity and raging paranoia had no room for a new king. Why (!) Herod (!) had already killed off a few heirs in order to prevent any competition for his throne. Knowing this, Herod's advisors work to calm his fears. "No, this is not a new king who will make Jerusalem even more successful than it already is! You are looking at the wrong prophecy. Try Micah, the prophetic peasant farmer who speaks of Bethlehem, not high towers and great arenas, commerce and urban achievement. There is no threat to your imperial greatness that can come from Bethlehem!"

They were right to assure Herod that his reign was not in danger, and they were correct about Micah's prophecy. Bethlehem was a little rural place; dusty and unnoticed. It was not yet the great tourist attraction that it is today. Nor had it, as of yet, become such a place of contest between occupying armies that it had walls with military checkpoints. At that time, Bethlehem was a sleepy village and was certainly no competition for imperialists who had grand ambitions. (Brueggemann)

And so the astrologers from the East—these pagans—these Arabs (!)—travel nine more miles until they reach Bethlehem. They see the star shining above the place where Jesus lived, they enter, and they fall down to worship the Christ child. They give Him elaborate gifts and leave with joy in their hearts, forever changed because, as the prophet Isaiah says, God's glory was upon them. Their hearts were thrilled; their faces radiant.

One of the things I missed most while away from you on sabbatical was the Christmas Eve service. You see, I love that moment when we begin to fill this darkened sanctuary with light from the small candles we each hold. As I come to the end of each row, I take a moment to watch as the flame is passed, each face captured by and aglow from the soft light. It is what Peter Gomes says happens to us when we, like the wise men of old, leave our cares and duties in order to live under a crazy star that leads us to Bethlehem. He continues:

We have seen God and survived to tell the tale, moving about not knowing that our faces shine with the encounter, bearing the mark of the encounter forever and marveling in the darkest night of the soul at that wondrous star-filled night. (Sermons)

Someone whose face shines with the wonder of the star is Father Gregory Boyle. He is the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. It was founded in 1992 after Father G became the priest at Delores Mission, the poorest Catholic parish in Los Angeles. The city, as a whole, was struggling to deal with escalating gang violence. At that time, Boyle Heights, the neighborhood in which the church is located, had more gang

members per capita than any other place in the United States. Living through what Father G called the decade of death, Father G decided that he had to do something to create redemptive opportunities. And so Homeboy, and later Homegirl, Industries was founded.

Employing only former gang members, Homeboy operates a bakery, catering service, farmer's market, a diner called "City Hall," and they sell merchandise on which Homeboy does all the silk screening and embroidery. Ten thousand gang members from across Los Angeles come through Homeboy Industries' doors every year. They are seeking after a crazy star that might bring positive change into their lives. And so Father G welcomes them into a community that offers services ranging from tattoo removal to anger management to parenting classes. He also gives full time employment to more than 200 men and women so that they may become contributing members of their community in positive ways. (homeboyindustries.com)

Frequently overwhelmed by the sheer size of the burdens he is asked to share in carrying, Father G has found that there is value in just showing up. And so, he shows up in the hospital, in the courtroom, at the funeral home, on the corner and to give rides to those who request his help. One of these requests came from Pedro, who needed a ride to his rehab appointment. Father G writes: ([Tattoos on the Heart](#), p. 127 ff)

Pedro is insistent on telling me about a dream he had the night before. In this dream, Pedro and I are in this large, empty room, just the two of us. There are no lights, no illuminated exit signs, no light creeping in from under the doors.

There are no windows. There is absolutely no light, but he seems to know that I am there with him even though we do not speak. Suddenly, in this dark silence, I retrieve a flashlight from my pocket and push it on. I find the light switch in the room, on the wall, and I shine this narrow beam of light on the switch. I don't speak. I just hold the beam steady, unwavering. Pedro says that even though no words are exchanged, he knows he is the only one who can turn this light switch on. He makes his way to the switch, following the beam...and with a deep breath, flips it on so that the room is flooded with light.

Pedro is sobbing at this point and with a voice of astonishing discovery says, "and the light is better than the darkness."

To live under a crazy star means that we occasionally know where to aim the light so that another can find their way out of the darkness. We cannot save anybody, but we can share the Light of the World with those who find themselves in dark, windowless rooms, fumbling around for grace. It is our challenge as believers, but it is specifically the calling of deacons, who are coming to be ordained and affirmed this day as light bearers to this congregation.

Ordination

Pam Patterson
Amy Woodward
Karen Stinnett

As we consider our role as light bearers to the world, I hope you will remember watching as Logan, Addison and Avery brought the Light of the World into the sanctuary this morning. Because children are so resilient and resourceful, we rarely stop to acknowledge the frightening world in which they live. I could have asked any number of children for their help, but I specifically asked Logan, Addison and Avery because of something they recently experienced.

There is a family in their school system with two children, Pepper and Reif. Pepper is a playmate of Addison and Avery's. Reif is such a good friend to Logan that their school desks are right next to one another. Pepper and Reif's mother died in her sleep last week. Her heart simply failed. Addison, Avery, and Logan have been walking in a dark world these first days of a New Year, and yet, here they are, bringing the Light to us, as well as to their friends. It is what living under a crazy star means, isn't it? It requires a certain stripe of bravery in a time of danger and uncertainty... not just as deacons, but as wise believers in a Light that will not fail.

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So maybe you have decisions you wish to make public about your role as a Light bearer to the world. I will be here to receive any decisions as we stand and sing hymn #152, "What Star Is This with Beams so Bright."