

The Boldness of Light
Isaiah 60.1-6, Matthew 2.1-12
January 7, 2018
Epiphany Year B
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What a cozy winter vacation it has been! The rare occurrence of freezing temperatures for days combined with the Christmas and New Year holiday break, a good set of flannel sheets and down comforter led to some good, slow sabbath time for the Lott Family. We had nowhere to be, no deadlines to meet, and no set schedule for over a week. We played board games, watched movies, drank quarts of hot chocolate, worked on a 1000 piece puzzle of New Orleans (that's still not quite finished), and nestled into warm beds for reading. My son has wanted me to join him for some time now in another fiction series, this one based on Norse mythology. He'd strategically place the book on my bedside table, move it to my pillow, add a note that said, "Read me!" But it took the perfect configuration of these winter days for me to open to the first page, and I was so immediately hooked that I read all 491 pages in under 36 hours.¹

This is not the first time Turner has talked me into reading Rick Riordan with him, in fact it is the 11th. These series feature ordinary teenagers with extraordinary abilities who do not quite fit in in the everyday world of Earth. Through a series of terrifying and exhilarating events, the teens discover they are demigods, heroes, spirit guides to the dead, or even oracles. What seemed like odd childhoods, awkward personality traits, or difficult learning abilities turn out to be essential for the truth and survival of each character's identity. In the story I picked up last week, the title character, Magnus Chase, slowly discovers and comes into his giftedness as he journeys with a dwarf, an elf, a valkyrie, and a few heroes through magical realms. Along the way, he begins to realize he is the son of the god Frey—god of peace, fertility, summer, sunshine—and he has a gift of healing. Magnus can sense the sadness within someone and feels their literal or emotional brokenness. He has the power to bear the weight of a burden with that person and can use his own strength to heal them.

With each effort at healing, he learns to trust the strength of his power and discovers empathetic connections to those he's healing. After a particularly grueling fight, two friends are injured. Magnus heals the Valkyrie, Sam, first. Then turns to Hearthstone,

¹ Rick Riordan, *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard: The Sword of Summer*, pp.340-341

one of the men who has been protecting him for two years who is deaf and communicates with Magnus through sign language. Hearthstone is badly injured, and Magnus can sense both his physical and emotional pain. To heal him, Magnus must focus on the warmth of summer and happiest memories. He visualizes picking blueberries along a hill with his mother; a glittering bay in the distance. As he works, Magnus sends “a flood of warmth into Hearthstone’s chest.

His eyes flew open.

He stared at [Magnus], uncomprehending. Then he pointed at [Magnus’s] face and gestured weakly—the sign for light.

“What do you mean?” [Magnus] asked.

Sam [the first to be healed] groaned. She rose on one arm and squinted at [Magnus.] “Magnus...why are you glowing?”

[Magnus] looked at his hands. Sure enough, [he] seemed to be dipped in...light. The warm buttery aura was starting to fade, but [he] could feel residual power tingling along his arms.

The more he heals, the more he glows.

This scene has stayed with me as I’ve contemplated Epiphany—the season of light. A healing, empathetic child of a god who harnesses joy and peace of to bring healing until he himself glows as though dripping with the light of the sun. Bold, embodied light, that cannot help but shine in darkness.

If our starting point in scripture is the wise ones following the star, it is easy for us to leave the light far away, up in the sky, off at a distance, or even a one-off story from thousands of years ago. But we don’t read scripture that way, we look for the threads that connect to that moment, and Isaiah 60 invites us into this coming light that isn’t just moving but is compelling and inviting as it goes, demanding action: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.”

For the prophet, this light is here, the presence of God is upon you, over you. The few verses we read this morning speak of your light, your dawn and describe impact to your land, the nations, and even animals being drawn to the light. This is not “you” the individual. This is Isaiah speaking to a nation and a land all at once. MaryAnn McKibben Dana observes, “God’s light-filled shalom is not just good news for a people, but for the entire created order.”² Kings and camels and exiles alike are drawn

² <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/old-testament/epiphanycot/>

to this light. This is also not a light that is singularly out there at one point to see and follow, this is light that permeates all of creation to fulfill the work of God.

To a people who have been dragged away into exile, there is also a bright word of promise: the deep darkness of exile will become the bold light of returning home. The light is within you, before you, coming to you, within the land, guiding the people, guiding creation itself. Hear these words spoken to a people in a place of loss, carried off far away. What is this light? This Divine light doesn't just shine to guide the way from point A to point B. No, this Divine light restores, heals, repairs, reconciles, makes home.

Now follow the thread back into our Jesus tradition, we have the gospel according to John reminding us Jesus said to the people, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8.12) "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind." (John 1.4) Light not in the sky, not at a pinpoint to follow, but in the lived way of this man who restores, heals, repairs, reconciles, makes home.

We're tempted to put all the boldness of this Divine light fully in Jesus just as we are tempted to dismiss the star either as singular or as having nothing to do with our calling today. With Isaiah's words at our backs, "Arise, shine," let's turn to Matthew's gospel in which Jesus preaches, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify God in heaven." (Matthew 5.13-14)

Here's the thing about light—it doesn't just exist in one place. It shines and reflects and expands. This light is in us, too. This active, shining light that restores, heals, repairs, reconciles, makes home. This light that shines like a star and points the way to the Christ. This light that moves through the created world and brings healing. The same light that Jesus claims is the light within him become the within us. Arise, shine, your light has come. You are the light of the world.

Now everything I just said could be really easy to dismiss as blessing-light instead of blessing-deep, blessing-rich, blessing-molasses that slowly pours out and covers everything. Blessing-light is to say: *You're light, I'm light, the camels are light, the ground is light, it's all light.* That's not what I'm saying. And I don't think that's what Isaiah was saying. And I don't think that's what Jesus was saying. There is an active boldness at the heart of God that is also in you. There is an active boldness to the

shining light in Isaiah's prophecy—drawing exiles to the fullness of home—that is also in you. There is an active boldness in the life and work of Jesus that is also in you. You are stars shining and guiding the way of the Christ child. You are light bearers who are not just called but fully equipped to restore, heal, repair, reconcile, and make home in the way of Jesus. This is what it means to be the light of the world.

I'm reminded of those great words by Clarissa Pinkola Estes—the ones we've revisited time and time again, "One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. Soul on deck shines like gold in dark times. The light of the soul throws sparks, can send up flares, builds signal fires, causes proper matters to catch fire. To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these -- to be fierce and to show mercy toward others; both are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity. Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it."³

Friends, it is the first Sunday of a brand new year. It is the beginning of the season of Epiphany—the light that guides, the light that restores, the light that is in Christ, the light that is in you. This is not the season of resolutions, this is the season of returning to the fullness of who God created you to be. This is the season for embracing the boldness of who you are in the eyes of Jesus the Christ. What happens in 2018 if you shine like gold in dark times? What happens if you are willing to show your light fully for the sake of the world? What happens if we as a people step even more boldly into our calling as light bearers who restore, heal, repair, reconcile, and make home in the way of Jesus? Arise! Shine! Your light has come! You, dear ones, are the light of the world. Amen.

³ <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=548>