

“Arise, Shine!”

Isaiah 60:1-6

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Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, was a teenager in 1944 when he and his family were taken from their home in Hungary and deported to a concentration camp in Germany. In his book *Night* Wiesel recalls their arrival at Auschwitz:

“The beloved objects that we had carried with us from place to place were now left behind in the wagon and, with them, finally our illusions. Every few yards, there stood an SS man, his machine gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the throng.

“An SS came toward us wielding a club. He commanded: ‘Men to the left! Women to the right!’

“Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight simple short words. Yet that was the moment when I left my mother. There was no time to think, and I already felt my father’s hand press against mine: we were alone. In a fraction of a second I could see my mother, my sisters, move to the right. [My sister] Tzipora was holding Mother’s hands. I saw them walking farther and farther away; Mother was stroking my sister’s blond hair, as if to protect her.

“And I walked on with my father, with the men. I didn’t know that this was the moment in time and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora forever. I kept walking, my father holding my hand.”¹

The men continued walking until they came to a crossroads, where an officer wielded a baton that was moving constantly, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left. Wiesel stood before the man with the baton. He was asked his age, his health, and his profession. The baton pointed Wiesel to the left.

“We did not know, as yet, which was the better side, right or left, which road led to prison and which to the crematoria. Still, I was happy. I was near my father....”

They continued their march until they could see up ahead the parting of the ways to left or right. “Twenty more steps....Ten more steps. Eight. Seven. We were walking slowly, as one follows a hearse, our own funeral procession. Only four more steps....Two steps from the pit, we were ordered to turn left and herded into barracks. I squeezed my father’s hand....”²

Wiesel was assigned to forced labor. He lost his family, but survived the camps until the Allied liberation in the spring of 1945. His book *Night* is the recollection of his memories, despair, and faith struggle as an observant Jew experiencing the unspeakable evil of humanity. In one of the most powerful passages in Holocaust literature, Wiesel says of the experience:

“Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the small

faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky. Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes. Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”³

Some 2,400 years before World War II and the Holocaust, another Jewish writer spoke into the darkness of suffering and evil. About 520 BCE the poet-prophet, today known as “Third Isaiah,” wrote the final chapters of the Book of Isaiah. He spoke from God a word of hope into the darkness and despair of Israel’s suffering: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” It was a word spoken to people who were in the darkness.

For over seventy years the people of Israel had suffered oppression, killing, and brutality at the hands of the Babylonians. In 587 BCE the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and his armies had invaded Judah and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple. Many Jews were deported to exile. Many died and many others were scattered to places outside their homeland. Years later, some of the exiles managed to return home to a ruined land, to poverty, and to frustrated attempts to rebuild their lives. After decades of suffering and doubts about God’s power and faithfulness, finally they heard those words: “Arise, shine; for your light has come.”

The “word of the Lord” Isaiah said is: “Arise, because your light has come like the rising of the sun at dawn. God is here and has not abandoned you. The glory of the Lord—God’s light-filled presence—has risen upon you. God is here to save, to renew and restore you.

Isaiah’s was a bold word announcing that Israel’s long season of darkness was over. Jerusalem and Judah would be restored. The people of Israel could trust God’s faithfulness. “For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and God’s glory will appear over you.” It is the good news of the light of God’s presence that speaks into the darkness of God’s people everywhere.

We too know the darkness, don’t we? We know it in the violence, killing, and wars of our own day. We know it in the prejudice, bigotry and racism in our world. We know the darkness in the hunger and homelessness, the disease and death, the injustice in our world.

We know the darkness in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. We know the darkness in the anger and cynicism of people. We know the darkness when a marriage is failing, or when our work ceases to be fulfilling. We know the darkness of feeling alone, overwhelmed, and helpless. We know it in the cancer and Alzheimers, in the struggles of alcoholism and addictions. We know the darkness when we feel powerless to help another who is in pain, or grieving a death or a lost dream. We know it when no words will help, and there is nothing left to say. We know, with Elie Wiesel, the darkness that leaves us asking, “Why God?” or threatens to consume our faith.

What's your darkness? What's the darkness inside you, or right around you, or the darkness of those whom you love and care about?

“The Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.” It is the promise that darkness will not be the last word. Darkness will be transformed into light. This is the promise of God that enables us to put one foot in front of the other, even when we can find no reason to do so.

Hope is not a denial of reality. Hope is remaining open to God, wrestling with God, believing that God is there, even in the darkness. Hope is waiting for God when we're at the end of our own resources, our own efforts to control and change and fix things. Hope is the promise that if we're listening, we will finally hear the words, “Arise, shine; for your light has come.”

This light is not something we do. It's not something we generate. It's something God gives us. What we're called to do is to believe the promise. We're called to lay aside our own desperate efforts to fix things. We're called to let go of the dark, turn our lives over to God, and let in the light of God.

The good news is that no matter how dark the night, the light of God's presence will come. We can trust that promise and live open to it.

Do you hear those imperative verbs—“arise, shine”? Although we do not generate the light, *we are called to do something*. We're called to let God's light shine in our lives, so that others will be drawn to the light. “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn,” Isaiah writes. “Lift your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you....”

In the remainder of this passage Isaiah paints a rich poetic picture of “the nations” coming to visit Israel. He paints a picture of traders and camel caravans bringing the wealth and abundance of the nations to Israel. He imagines a world in which Israel, long exploited and oppressed, is honored. The nations come because they recognize the light of God's presence and they come to give praise and glory to God. “They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

No wonder the early Christian church saw in the story of the coming of the wise men to visit the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12) a connection to or “fulfillment” of Isaiah's words, “they shall bring gold and frankincense.” The wise men, representing the nations of the world, were drawn to the light of God's presence in Jesus.

The original intent of Isaiah's passage was to proclaim new life for 6th century Judah and Jerusalem. That new life from God would be a witness to the nations around Israel. So Isaiah says, “Arise, shine. Let the new light of God's presence shine into the darkness of the world, so that others may see and be drawn to God's presence.”

I'm reminded of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world....Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.” Like Isaiah, Jesus is saying that our calling as God's people

is to be the light of God's presence in the world. We are called to make a difference by what we do and say, and by how we live. Letting God's light shine in our lives means caring for people and their needs, reaching out to them, and loving them. Letting the light shine means pushing back the darkness—wherever it is found.

That brings us back to Elie Wiesel. "Never shall I forget," he said. And he did not forget. Wiesel dedicated the rest of his life to ensuring that we would not forget the Holocaust. He also went on to work ardently for victims of injustice, famine, and genocide throughout the world. He became engaged in human rights activities around the world, supporting the causes of victims as diverse as the Miskito Indians in Nicaragua, Cambodian refugees, South Africans under apartheid, Bosnians in Yugoslavia, Tutsis in Rwanda, and the Sudanese in Darfur. Wiesel has lived the words of Isaiah and of Jesus, "Arise, let your light shine, so that the light of God's glory will make a difference in this world."

What's your darkness? What's the darkness inside you, or right around you—or the darkness of those whom you love and care about? Where are you called to "Arise, shine"?

The season of Epiphany is the season of light. Epiphany celebrates the coming of God's light into our world and the coming of God's light in Jesus. Today we light these candles on the Communion table to celebrate the season of Epiphany. The candles, given by all of us, are reminders that we are called to be the light of the world.⁴

Have you heard the story of Vedran Smailovic? He is a Bosnian from the city of Sarajevo. Born into a musical family, he became a professional musician. By the age of thirty-seven he became principal cellist of the prestigious Sarajevo Opera Theater.

In 1992 war was raging in Bosnia. Bosnia was a bleak, dark place of brutality, ethnic cleansing, and deadly fighting in the streets. On May 27, 1992, near the apartment where Smailovic lived, a long line of starving people waited for bread in front of the only bakery in Sarajevo that still had enough flour to make bread. While standing in line the people were shelled and twenty-two of them died in the attack. Smailovic saw it happen as he stood at his apartment window nearby.

The next day, as hungry people again lined up at the bakery to beg for bread—willing to risk their lives for food—Vedran Smailovic, dressed in the black suit and tie in which he played every night until the Opera Theater was destroyed, arrived carrying his cello and chair.

Smailovic sat down in the rubble of the square and, surrounded by the despair of the living, began to play Tomaso Albinoni's "Adagio in G Minor." Amid the continuing danger, he came back to the square every day after that for twenty-one more days to do the same—twenty-two days in all to honor the people killed by the attack.

Smailovic caught the imagination of people around the world. He became known as "the cellist of Sarajevo." Today in the place where he sat there is a monument of a man in a chair playing a cello. The monument is not to his music. It is to Smailovic's refusal to

surrender the hope that life and beauty could be reborn in the midst of a living hell. It was Smailovic's way of letting his light shine in a darkened world.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen on you.” The question for each one of us is, How will you let your light shine? How will you let the light of God's presence shine for others in this world? How will you do it—this afternoon, tomorrow, this week?

“Arise, shine!” What will you do?

Notes

¹Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006; previous editions 1958, 1972, 1985), p. 29.

²Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 32-34.

³Wiesel, *Night*, p. 34.

⁴The candles on the Communion table were given by the families in the church as part of a stewardship appeal with the theme, “You Are the Light of the World.” Each Sunday during the Epiphany season more candles were added until the whole congregation was represented. Each candle was dedicated to the memory of a loved one, in honor of a special occasion or person, or in support of a ministry or social cause. Each candle carried a tag inscribed with the dedication. The candles, used periodically in worship throughout the year, were a symbol that the people of God are called to be light in the world.

⁵Accounts of the Vedran Smailovic story are found in various sources. I have followed the story as it is told by Joan D. Chittister in her book, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), pp. 108-09.