

An Invitation to be Empowered

Isaiah 60: 1-6 (January 3, 2021)

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. 5Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6A 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.

Historical Context

Isaiah 60 is part of Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66). Third Isaiah is situated in the sixth century BCE as the exiles from Babylonian returned to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, a major conflict had arisen between those who remained and those who returned. Living conditions were extremely difficult. Jerusalem was in ruins. The people were now divided again not against some outside threat or enemy but among themselves.

Zion, both the geographical locale (Jerusalem) as well the idea of a sacred bond between people, place, and God, was in ruins. The Zion poems of Isaiah 40-66 represent an attempt to rebuild the idea of Zion and to infuse her with a new vigor. This effort is not simply to make people feel better nor to reclaim a theological idea for its own sake. The purpose of the rehabilitation of Zion is to inspire and empower the people to help make this glorious vision a reality.

Theme: An Invitation to be Empowered

Isaiah 60:1-6 is a piece of poetry brimming with energy and hope. The tone is triumphant and tender, and it can be difficult for a contemporary audience with some knowledge of history to reconcile it with the reality of the postexilic period; a period that did not see a dramatic reversal of fortune for Zion. It's important to remember, however, that biblical prophecy is not flat prediction but is, rather, an invitation to change, to be empowered, and, sometimes, to repent. Within Zion's call to witness in Isaiah 60:1-6 is also a call to the community to believe in the vision, to endure the present hardship, and, with God, to bring the vision into reality.

It can be difficult to promote the triumphant visions of the prophets without sounding like a pie in the sky dreamer. It is important to emphasize that these visions were meant to sustain and empower people to create and to build, to remain faithful, and to love their God and each other. Not one of those acts is passive or dreamy but requires the commitment and courage that a shared vision of a better future can produce.