“But the Lord”
Isaiah 60:1-6

I love the show *Survivor.* I’ve seen each of the 47 seasons, including the one that just concluded on Wednesday night. Survivor is a show where anything can happen. In the new era of the show, eighteen people are divided into three teams and left to survive on a remote Fijian island.

They have to create a community together in order to survive, but are also competing against one another, trying not to get voted out. People form alliances, and then break alliances…folks try to balance being a leader but not seeming like too much of a threat…there’s a constant ebb and flow of power from one player to another.

And just when you think things are settled…when one person thinks they’re running the game and someone else is sure they’re at the bottom, something will happen that turns the whole game upside down. A down-and-out player finds an advantage that guarantees they can’t get voted out. Someone makes a persuasive argument that leads a person to betray their alliance.

Or, in what is consistently the biggest game-changer each season, the merge comes. The three tribes are merged into one, which means everything is up in the air. Old alliances fall away, new advantages are possible, and overnight, someone who was sure they were going to be sent home next can find themselves the most powerful person in the game.

Survivor is a game of reversals of fortune. It’s what makes it so fun to watch…you just never know what’s going to happen.

Isaiah 60 is a “reversal of fortune” text. It’s the flip. But to see how it’s a reversal of fortune, we need to know what comes first, what it’s flipping from. We need to read it in light of Isaiah 59.

And Isaiah 59 is BLEAK.

“Your iniquities have separated you from your God…your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt….Justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like people without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong, we are like the dead. We all grow like bears; we moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away.”

Oof.

Isaiah 59 and 60 are found in what’s called Third Isaiah. These are prophetic texts written to the Jewish people after they’ve returned home from exile. That return itself was a reversal of fortune, a great rescue, a deliverance. But coming home didn’t end the plight of the Israelites.

Because when they returned home, they found home lay in ruins. The walls of Jerusalem had been reduced to rubble. The temple was gone. The land was barren, the people crippled by poverty.

There’s still a threat of foreign powers invading and taking over again. The neighbouring countries aren’t pleased that Israel seems to be getting a foothold again.

But there’s also the threat of infighting. Not all the Jewish people were taken into exile. Some – mostly the “nobodies” of society – had been

left behind. In the absence of the ruling class, these “nobodies” had begun running things themselves. Now as people return – as the leaders, the wealthy, the upper class return – great conflicts emerge between the remnant and the returners.

Because, remember, the exile wasn’t just a three or four year excursion experience. The exile lasted 70 years. People were born and died in exile. Multiple generations grew up in Babylon. Which meant multiple generations grew up surrounded by different culture, and food, and ways of living. They had, as Jeremiah had instructed them, built houses and settled down, planted gardens, married, had kids, and sought the prosperity of the city they now found themselves within.

So it’s almost certain that those returning to Jerusalem included non-Jews who had married into the culture, and children who had been raised in Babylonian culture, and people who had studied in Babylonian schools and learned new ideas. People had changed in exile. Ideas of what it meant to live in the world had changed. Ideas of what it meant to be *Jewish* had changed in exile.

So there’s a culture clash when the exiles return. And this isn’t just a two-hour debate on the floor of synod, or opeds in the Globe and Mail. This is rebellion and treachery, says Isaiah 59. This is revolt and oppression. This is different groups of people who are so convinced that they’re right, that they know how they ought to live, that they’re willing to kill each other over it.

Martin Luther, borrowing ideas from Saint Augustine, described sin as *incurvatus in se* - humanity turned inward on itself. The people of Israel have turned inward on themselves, focusing on who’s right and who’s

wrong, trying to rebuild the people of Israel in their own image, looking around in suspicion and distrust.

And a people who are turned inward on themselves cannot see the light. They have enough sense to know that things aren't right. They *want* the light, they don't want to live like this, they want deliverance, but they don't know how to get out of the mess they've made. They go to bed in despair, certain that there is no hope on the horizon.

And then, Isaiah 60. Out of nowhere. A reversal of fortune.

"Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you."

Preacher Stan Mast says you can find the Gospel in just three words of this passage: "But the Lord."

At the end of the day, it's not up to the people to figure their way out of the mess they've made. God's not waiting for them to mend their ways and get their act together.

God interrupts. God shows up. God intervenes.

As God has done time and time again.

And when God interrupts, you can't help but look up from your naval gazing and pay attention. Because when God interrupts…it's a surprising and astonishing thing.

Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery out of jealousy. But the Lord uses Joseph to save whole nations from famine.

The Israelites are enslaved in Egypt, backs breaking under Pharoah's hand. But the Lord uses a stuttering outcast to lead them into freedom.

The Israelites are facing a massive army and a giant. But the Lord uses a teenager and a slingshot to take that giant down.

Sometimes when God shows up, its through a powerful display of his majesty. He parts the Red Sea, he sends down a pillar of fire, he fills the temple with light.

But more often than not, God interrupts the story by using a perfectly ordinary, nondescript person through whom he does something extraordinary, reversing the fortunes of his people.

So when God himself shows up in a world of darkness, it is both the greatest surprise – and no surprise at all – that he does so as an ordinary, nondescript little baby.

Here, wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger, is the glory of God.

And this child of glory is the answer to Israel's problem. From the very beginning Israel was meant to be a light to the nations. They were blessed to be a blessing. But all their infighting, their inward focus, meant they weren't a very good witness to the world. In fact, a big part of their infighting stemmed from the fact that many people didn't want outsiders, Gentiles, other nations, to be brought into the family at all.

So God doesn't wait for Israel to step outside her walls and invite people in. God shows up in Israel's midst with a light powerful enough to draw the nations to her doors. In the coming of Christ there is both a

blessing and a challenge presented to Israel. God has not abandoned her. Jesus is yet born in Bethlehem, to the house of David. But God doesn't show up for Israel alone. "Nations will come to this light," says Isaiah 60, "and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

This text is usually preached on Epiphany, paired with the story of the Magi. The first people to come to the Saviour were Jewish shepherds. But the *next* people to show up are scholars from a foreign land. Gentiles. This is no accident. The Gospel, writes Paul in Romans 1, "is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile."

Christ is the fulfillment of the Isaiah 60 prophecy. The glory of God rising in the midst of Israel, interrupting her darkness and despair, bring hope of a new thing, a new story, a new way of being in the world.

And what is that new way of being in the world?

It's not the way of pride, or inward focus, or insistence on being right.

It's not the way of anger or oppression.

It's not the way of power for power's sake.

This way of being is laid out for us in Philippians 2, where Paul writes,

"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death-
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father."

Christ's glory was found in his humility. This new way of being in the world is the way of sacrifice and love. In our world of darkness and despair, when our natural impulse is to turn inwards, to be suspicious of others, to be impatient, and to lash out in anger, Christ shows us another way. And he calls us to this way.

Because Isaiah 60 doesn't start with, "Then God arose and shone."

It starts with, "Arise, shine."

God has brought about this great reversal, this new thing, this glory found in the humility of Christ.

But as the Lord used Joseph, and Moses, and David, so the Lord uses us, calls us to shine forth with this same light - his light. He calls us to interrupt people's despair and normal behaviour, by turning the other cheek, by being slow to anger, by listening, by giving up our own desires for the sake of someone else. He calls us to do something new.

I heard a story this week from Elizabeth Oldfield, a theological thinker and writer who I follow on Instagram. She does a lot of work trying to bridge differences, and so has studied a lot of ways to interrupt cycles of tension and disagreement by doing something surprising.

She told this story of walking her kids home from school on Wednesday. They were crossing at an intersection, when a cyclist ran a red light and almost hit one of her kids. She yelled after him, "Hey, we had the right of way, there are kids here…watch where you're going!" The cyclist stopped, turned around, started walking towards her in anger and said, "What did you just say to me?"

And Elizabeth…who's studied moment just like this, took a beat, and said, "Bless you sir, I hope your day gets better."

The cyclist yelled again, "What did you just say to me?" Because he expected her to say something nasty.

And she said again, "Bless you."

She said you could see his face kind of twitch because he couldn't process what had just happened. And then she saw all the rage just drain out of his body. She put her hand to her heart, and he did the same and said, "Bless you too" and cycled off.

The way of Jesus is a surprising way. And when it interrupts our patterns of despair and anger and inward-focus, it causes people to look up. To see the light. To see a different way of being in the world. A way that promises hope and peace and joy and love.

So "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you."

Would you pray with me?

God, thank you for doing a new thing in the world,
for interrupting the darkness and shining forth in your glory,
a glory of humility and mercy and love.
May we shine with this same light,
interrupting the despair around us,
disarming the cycles of anger and envy
that are so easy to fall into,
and so spread your light of your Gospel
in a world that desperately needs renewal.
Do something new among us, O God.
We place our hope in you.
We pray this in the name of Christ, our Saviour,
Amen.