

## Trembling with excitement

Isaiah 60:1-6

December 31, 2006

When was the last time you trembled with excitement?

Was it when you saw Iowa score the first fourteen points in the Alamo Bowl? Was it the last time the Patriots won the Super Bowl?

Was it when you heard the news of the German surrender at Reims on VE Day? Was it when you listened as Neil Armstrong spoke to the world from the surface of the moon?

Was it when you watched your wife unwrap the gift you had so carefully selected just for her? When you watched your son take his first steps? Or your daughter score her first goal?

Was it the first time you held hands? The first time you were kissed? Was it on your wedding day? Was it on your son's wedding day?

Was it when you reached the top of a mountain in Maine or Colorado or Wyoming, or the top of a skyscraper in Chicago or New York or Boston, and you turned in every direction taking in the view?

When was the last time you trembled with excitement? Or do you not get that excited anymore? Is that kind of excitement something you left behind in childhood? Are you older and wiser and more sophisticated now, more realistic, more cynical, more adult?

When was the last time you trembled with excitement in church? Was it the last time you heard one of my sermons? Was it the last time you heard Celeste sing or Anne play or Molly dance? Was it the day your baby was baptized? Was it the last time you took communion?

When was the last time you trembled with excitement in church? Never? Or was it just a few minutes ago, when you heard these words:

*Arise, and shine like the sun;  
the glory of the Lord is shining on you!*

Isaiah first spoke these words to the people of Jerusalem. They were at that time a suffering people, a dispirited people, a people without hope. They were a people whose families were scattered over the face of the earth, whose homes and fields were ravaged and abandoned, whose nation was no nation, just the doormat of the Babylonian empire.

Isaiah tells them that the glory of the Lord is shining ... on them! The glory of the Lord is shining on them, and they will see soon -- very soon -- its effects. There will be no more darkness! No more sorrow! No more terror! No more humiliation!

Nations will be drawn to them, to their light. Their children will come home from all the faraway places to which they have been scattered. Visitors, important visitors, will come to them from every direction, bearing gifts and helping spread the news of the new and wonderful things the Lord is doing.

Their land will be revived, their dignity will be restored, their people will come home, and the glory of the Lord will shine on them! And when they see it all happening, they will be filled with joy, they will tremble with excitement.

Visitors from a foreign land, drawn by a light, bearing gifts, bearing gifts of gold and incense. Sound familiar?

Matthew's gospel tells the story of visitors from the East, drawn to Jerusalem by the appearance of a star, traveling far to offer their gifts and their worship to the child they understood to be the newborn king of the Jews. It may not have been caravans of camels carrying great wealth, just a small group of Persian astrologers bringing simple gifts, but it's clear that Matthew means to connect Jesus' story to Isaiah's promise delivered some five hundred years earlier.

Matthew includes the story of the visitors from the East for several reasons. He is concerned to show that the good news about Jesus is not just for the Jews, but for Gentiles too, for all the people of this earth. And he wants to show that the things Isaiah was talking about have happened and are happening and will happen, because of Jesus. Jesus is the light of the world, the reflection of God's glory. Jesus is the one who makes friends out of enemies and brings scattered people home. Jesus is the one who heals our land, who heals all lands, the one who brings *shalom* to the earth.

Matthew wants the people to whom he writes, the early followers of Jesus living out their faith in a hostile world, living often as an oppressed and ridiculed minority, to know that the glory of the Lord is shining on them! He wants them to open their eyes to see what the Lord is doing among them. He wants them to strengthen their minds and hearts and to be confident of what the Lord will do among them. He wants them to get excited!

But we don't get that excited anymore. We're older and wiser. We're more sophisticated, more realistic. We're just too cool for all that.

Our culture favors the James Bond type: cool and calm and collected, never getting too excited, almost seeming a little bored with it all, always in control of your emotions, never letting anyone push your buttons. If you get too excited about anything -- other than a sporting event, of course, because it's OK to get excited about sports, you're expected to get excited about sports -- if you get too visibly excited about anything else, you look, well, kind of foolish.

So, what I want to know is this: what's wrong with looking foolish? You're sitting there, bored and cynical, been there done that, nothing amazes you anymore, no one's ever going to catch you looking silly, and I'm over here trembling with excitement, and I'm the foolish one?

The shame of our churches, the paralyzing flaw in so many of our churches, is that we let the culture shape us instead of the other way around. The attitudes and expectations and standards of contemporary society are mirrored in the church. We apply the standards of justice applied by everybody else. We adopt the priorities adopted by everybody else. We speak the wisdom spoken by everybody else. We expect our people to behave the way everybody else is behaving. And, among other things, we expect our people not to get too excited! It's the weird people, the folks in those way out churches that get so excited, but we're too sophisticated, too mature, too adult for all that!

But when we allow the culture shape the church, the church quickly becomes irrelevant and powerless, only a tool for reinforcing prevailing prejudices. When we allow our faith to shape us, and when our faith begins to address and shape the prevailing culture, then the church becomes a tool for real transformation! And that's something to get excited about!

The glory of the Lord is shining on us! The light of Jesus is shining on us. Jesus is among us and Jesus is on the move: prodding, leading, teaching, encouraging, healing, reconciling, restoring, transforming. Hear him! See him! See what the Lord is doing! Believe what the Lord will do! Believe what the Lord can do here and now, in you, in this church, in this new year.

Is it possible, for you and for me, that as we contemplate the possibilities of this new year, as we contemplate the real possibilities of what the Lord can do in our lives and through our lives in this new year, we just might begin to tremble with excitement?