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Saint John's Episcopal Church
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

January 9, 2011
First Sunday of Epiphany
The Baptism of Jesus

Today's sermon is taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 60, verses 1-6.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Americans have traditionally been thought of as a positive, hopeful people; and perhaps the most positive, hopeful people on earth. I read an interesting story about a British man named Peter who was on a trip to America a few years ago. When he was in the lounge at Logan Airport, a stranger rushed up to him. "You're from England," noted the stranger. "Yes," Peter answered, "Are you?" "Used to be," the stranger answered. "Living over here now." "Cobham," answered Peter. "How marvelous!" said the stranger. "I used to live in Epsom Downs -- loveliest place in the world." "But presumably you like it better here?" Peter asked. "I loathe it here," replied the stranger. "Then your wife likes it better?" asked Peter. "She hates it," said the stranger. "Then surely you're earning a lot more than you were in England?" asked Peter. "The heck I am. I'm working harder and earning less," said the stranger. "Then why stay here?" asked Peter. "Why not come back with us." "I'll tell you why," said the stranger. "Because I've got a feeling here," and he started slapping the back of his head violently, "that tomorrow I'm going to hit the jackpot. I haven't hit it in eleven years, but I still feel I could hit it tomorrow, and it's a feeling you can't get in Britain. That's why I'm not coming back with you."

For this man, America represented hope and opportunity. That has been true for many generations. We call it "the American dream." It is the dream of a better life, and historically it has kept the people of the United States a hopeful and positive people. Even a terrible depression and two world wars could not dampen American optimism. Our music and our motion pictures have reinforced this positive spirit.

A British sailor recalls when World War II was ending, allied service men and women were returning home by hundreds of thousands. He was about to be discharged from the Royal Navy. He decided to enjoy an evening out and bought a ticket to a play in London. It was opening night of some American musical. He didn't know what the show was about; all he wanted was to celebrate the fact that he had lived through a war and would soon be going home. The first thing he noticed entering the theater was the brilliance of the lights. For years he and his companions in battle had had to get used to muted light and sometimes there was no light at all.

Now the world was suddenly light again, and the mood he noticed was festive and electric; but nothing prepared him for what happened when the curtain rose. The stage blazed with a sunlit world stretching infinitely, or so it seemed. The dancers and actors positively leaped upon the stage. The music joined them, the opening words transformed everyone there, and they went like this: "There's a bright golden haze on the meadow, there's a bright golden haze on the meadow. The corn is as high as an elephant's eye and it looks like it's climbing clear up to the sky." Many of you know the rest: "Oh, what a beautiful morning; oh, what a beautiful day; I've got a wonderful feeling! Everything's going my way."

Oklahoma was the musical. As a child it was my mother's favorite. She had a record of it, and she used to play it for me. She told me it was the first musical that she had ever seen. And there's something about it that brought a sudden blaze of energy, and of hope and a feeling of possibility and a decimated Europe and for America itself. The musicals of the 1940s and 1950s, particularly those of Rodgers and Hammerstein, are uniquely American phenomenon. Europeans make fun of the somewhat pollyanna enthusiasm that these productions represent. Only in America, European cynics complain, must every movie have a happy ending - that has been our tradition. Hope and optimism and energy for the future - that is our heritage.

Do you sense that we may be losing that hopeful glow? Perhaps it is the recession, but people seem more hopeless; they seem more angry, or more dogmatic, or is it just my imagination? Yesterday's event in Arizona just adds to that feeling. Even though we are still a very affluent people with strong corporations, a military second to none, world-class schools and hospitals, and a standard of living that is still the envy of the world, many of our people have reached the conclusion that we have lost our way, that the days ahead

will not be as bright as our former days.

I think the prophet is the prophet Isaiah, and Isaiah lived in a time when the people had nearly lost all hope, but they had good reason. Many of Israel's best and brightest were slowly returning from living as slaves in Babylon. The city of Jerusalem and its temple lay in ruins. The once-proud empire of David and Solomon was now a small colony on the fringe of the Persian Empire. Doom and gloom were everywhere when suddenly Isaiah sounding somewhat like Rodgers and Hammerstein burst on the scene proclaiming, "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. Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you. All assemble and come to you, your sons come from afar, your daughters are carried on the arm; then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy."

It is appropriate, I think, at the darkest time of the year that we celebrate Epiphany. One of the great themes of Epiphany is that of hope and light. "A light shines in the darkness. Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises upon you." I believe it is particularly significant that Isaiah proclaims, "Lift up your eyes." I have talked before about the relationship of downcast eyes and depression. People who are feeling down express that emotion by continually gazing down. Conversely, it makes sense that you can make yourself feel better by intentionally seeking to look up. At this dark, gloomy time of year, you can do yourself a favor by lifting up your eyes.

The psalmist wrote in Psalm 121, "I lift my eyes to the hills - where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."

This is our hope, and why should we lift up our eyes this day? First, you may think you are forgotten. You are not. That was Isaiah's message to his people. They thought God had forsaken them. That's what the birth of Jesus is all about. When you're not winning, when you're feeling terrible, when all the odds are stacked against you, when you become the laughing stock of your school or family, when you feel like the biggest loser of all time, Jesus is cheering you on. Jesus is there when nobody else is. You may think you're forgotten, but you're not. And secondly, you may think you are on your own.

You are not; someone is with you.

I read about a Russian poet and composer named Nikolai Boldova. Nikolai experienced first-hand the brutality of the prison system in Russia to Communists. "Lie on your belly," the guard yelled to Nikolai. Nikolai dropped to the icy, cold floor knowing that the torture would be excruciating. The guards then marched on his back and legs and feet with their heavy boots for the next hour. They left Nikolai badly bruised and bleeding. His fellow prisoners rushed to his side, deeply concerned about his condition, and Nikolai raised his head. "I have written a new hymn while I was being walked upon," he said. Then he began to sing. "May I not only speak about future heavens," his song began, "but let me have heaven and the holy feast here."

After Nikolai was released from prison, the Communist police went through his home and confiscated manuscripts that he had been working on for several years. Much of his life's work was gone. But Nikolai would not let this loss stop him. He composed another hymn: "I worship you with gratitude for all you ever gave me, but also for everything beloved you took from me. You do all things well, and I will trust you."

Nikolai Boldova could have been a victim, but he learned an important lesson. Life is an attitude. He had a battle plan. He chose to look up instead of being pulled down. He decided to cry out to God. Now his songs are sung throughout Russia -- Russia, the country that has rediscovered the power of Jesus.

You may think you've been forgotten, you may think you're on your own, you may think you'll never make it through. Who says it's up to you?

One of my best friends in life is Bruce Canonburg who lives in Southington, Connecticut. Bruce, about eight years ago, began his struggle with Alzheimer's. Bruce is only seventy years old, but it's very difficult for him to recognize me or his wife. In 1985 Bruce and I went to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Anaheim, California. It was a wonderful experience for me and for Bruce and for our relationship. One of the things about the General Convention was that it was in the Anaheim Convention Center which is located right across from Disneyland. On one of the adjournments in the afternoon, Bruce and I decided to go to Disneyland. And of all things, I couldn't wait (you're going to all laugh at this), I couldn't wait to get on the Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. Bruce was laughing about it all, but I

said I really want to go on this because I've heard it's kind of exciting. And as the car zoomed through the crazy rooms, into the path of a speeding train and through walls that fell away at the last second, I clutched the little steering wheel in front of me. When the ride was over, I turned to Bruce a little shakily and said, "Next time, Bruce, you drive." I didn't know where I was going. I momentarily didn't realize that I really was not in control the entire time.

I'm not sure that you and I have that much control over our lives. Life happens. Sometimes we feel like we are forgotten. Sometimes it feels like we are on our own. Sometimes it seems that we will not make it through, but what I want to say to you this morning, my friends, is that there is Good News. We are not in control. A loving God is in control of this world and our lives. Life shall not defeat us. "Arise, shine, for your light has come. Lift up your eyes and look about you; then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy."

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs