

## A WAY OF SEEING AND UNDERSTANDING

### ISAIAH 60: 1-6

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University Church of Chicago

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The wind—always the wind—swept in from Lake Michigan, straight west on Roosevelt Road as if it were a CTA bus. It brought snow along, swirling, biting snow that stung the faces of those people who waited at the corner of Roosevelt and Canal for the number 156. Jake Barnes put his head down as he crossed Roosevelt and opened the door to the White Castle café. He was surprised to find the place virtually deserted at two o'clock in the morning on the first day of the new year, 2010. In past years the café seemed to host its own New Year's party which began around ten o'clock in the evening and lasted until the wee hours of the morning.

As he usually did, Jake moved to the farthest corner of the place and sat down. When the huge waiter wearing his usual dirty, white T-shirt approached, Jake ordered a cinnamon roll and a cup of coffee. He stared straight ahead and muttered a half-whispered prayer: "Thank you, God, for another year. Please give me strength for this new one. Tell you the truth: it's hard to be thankful for most of last year, but I know You were with me."

Just then he felt a hand on his shoulder and he smelled the sweat and alcohol of the man who touched him. "Sorry," the man said as he sat beside Jake. "I stumbled. Too much to drink last night." The man was dressed in jeans, a blue and white-striped dress shirt, a blue blazer and cowboy boots. His eyes were clear and blue and were topped by a mane of white hair. His face had the color and texture of light leather and was covered by a two-day growth of white stubble. He looked at Jake. "You and I must be twins. We're dressed exactly alike. How about that?"

Turning around, Jake assented. "Kind of quintessential urban for middle-aged men, don't you think? Except for the boots—that makes us distinctive in Chicago. And I can tell by your accent that you are not from around here."

"Nope. And to tell you the truth, I don't know why I'm in Chicago or how I got here. My name is Willis Gibson." He stuck out his hand, and as they shook hands, Jake's mouth dropped open. "I know you," he said. "I haven't seen you in—what?—over forty years. You may not remember me, but I remember you. I'm Jake Barnes."

Willis thought for a minute and replied. "Sure, you were the football coach in Luther, Oklahoma. Took our team to the state championship game twice. Lost both times. You coached my kids, two of my boys. They loved you and hated you. Loved you because you taught them so much and hated you because you were so tough on them. But ultimately you were good for them."

Just then the door opened and threw a blast of cold snow into the café. In came two men who obviously were compatriots of Willis Gibson. The tall African American man with the shaved head, piercing brown eyes and stubbled gray beard approached with the obligatory knotted fist touched against Willis's fist, then a brief dance of a handshake. "Balthasar's the name!" he exclaimed with a hearty laugh. "Willis, he's Melchior, the white guy. And this young man"—pointing to a small, wiry man with eyes the color of a Wisconsin lake—"this is Gaspar. We're the Magi, the Wise Men who have come to save Chicago. Or at least haunt it."

"Cept we don't have any gifts to bring," said the young man. "But we are like the Magi. We're seekers. We're looking for truth and love and hope. At least we were when we were thoroughly drunk at the New Year's Eve party at the Blackstone Hotel. Right now I'm not sure of anything—even why we assumed the names of the three Wise Men for the new year. Willis, do you remember?"

Willis pointed to Jake. "Boys, this is my friend Jake Barnes. We haven't seen each other in forty years, since he coached football in my home town. Come to think of it, I remember now how you and I, Jake, would have those long, late-night discussions about religion and love in a restaurant not much different from this place—only cleaner than this one—when I was the town drunk. It was a small town, boys, so we only had one drunk: me."

A tiny African American woman made her way the length of the counter. She had been sitting toward the kitchen. She was clad in a huge black man's overcoat and a Chicago Bears stocking cap, men's pants and work boots that were stuffed with newspapers to ward off the winter cold. She carried two enormous black plastic bags which seemed to hold all her worldly possessions. "Coffee, two eggs over easy, bacon and two biscuits with lots of butter," she shouted at the waiter as she made room for Balthasar and Caspar.

"You guys think you are so clever, don't you?" She glared at the men. She had lost all but a few of her teeth, so her face had a beak-like quality. "Let me fill you in on some theories about the Magi. The Venerable Bede was the priest who came up with the names, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Some time around the year 700. And he was the one who interpreted the gifts the Magi brought: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold was an appropriate gift because it was given to a royal person. Frankincense symbolized something worthy of God and myrrh testified to the death of the Son of Man." She positively glowed. "See. I ain't as dumb as I look. I may be homeless, but I'm smart."

The silence in the café was palpable. Nobody spoke for several minutes. The jollity of the three "wise men" had been quashed. Finally, Jake stuck out his hand. "I'm Jake Barnes." She took his hand in her gloved hands. "I'm Dorcas Petty," she said. "Used to live in the Robert Taylor homes." She pointed toward the south of the café. "They're gone now. The neighborhood has been renamed: Bronzeville. So they can attract middle-class and upper-class folks. Working class people like me are no longer welcome."

"My friends did not mean to offend you," said Jake. "They may seem to be skeptical—even disdainful of religion, but I believe they are seekers. The one I know best is Willis Gibson, and I know for a fact that he is a Christian pilgrim who is always searching for truth."

Ms. Petty began to dig into her breakfast. She turned and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “You know what the First Lesson is for next Sunday? Well, I do. It’s from Isaiah, sixtieth chapter. You ever been to the Oriental Institute down there at 58<sup>th</sup> and University Avenue in Hyde Park—a few blocks from Obama’s home? Well, if you so-called seekers would get off your fat butts and go down there, you would see the stone on which is carved the edict of Cyrus of Persia that sent the Jews back to their home. That’s what Isaiah is talking about when he says “The Lord will arise upon you...Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

She took another bite, then turned and glared again. “You guys don’t get it. God uses foreigners, outsiders, even women, characters like me to fulfill God’s will.”

Willis moved to stand close to the old black woman. “Ms. Petty, I grew up in Oklahoma. I’ve been all over most of the world, working as a roustabout in oil fields, seeking truth, trying to find God. You are one smart woman, and I am frankly astonished at how much you know about the Bible and history. I’m an old man and I think God is using you to change my mind about a lot of things. I want us to talk more about religion and Jesus and God’s grace. I will buy your meal.”

“I know you will,” she replied. “I was counting on that. OK. Let’s work on some of your ingrained ideas. Like your belief that God has revealed himself to us—nice people, good folks who live decent lives. Tell the truth: you think of yourself as one of God’s chosen, don’t you? And those strange folks, those barbarians who don’t believe the way we do—well, our job is to conquer them. Right?”

Willis didn’t answer. Balthasar, the huge black man with the white beard, spoke up. “Ms. Petty, I know what you’re talking about. I served in the U.S. Army for twenty years, I was raised in the Presbyterian Church, I have wandered and wondered, and the more I learn about Jesus the more I question the notion that we are carrying out God’s will when we rain fire and destruction on people who are different from us.”

Dorcas turned on her stool and elbowed the big black man in the stomach. It was a blow so hard and surprising that he almost doubled over in pain. “Don’t get pious and crappy with me,” she shouted. “Ain’t you learned nothin’ in all your years of travel and searchin’? You can’t con a con artist. Tell me about your faith, not what you think I want to hear.”

The man who called himself Balthasar wiped sweat from his forehead. He spoke quietly. “Ms. Petty, I know something about living in exile darkness. What black person in America doesn’t? I don’t want to—need to—give you a laundry list of my sins or what’s wrong with our world. We can get that every day from TV news or by walking through our own neighborhood. What I’m trying to say is that I believe that Isaiah voices what God knows—the realities of living in this sinful world. He knows just how thick the darkness can get.”

Jake moved over and put his left arm around Balthasar’s shoulder. “My friend,” he said, “the darkness is thick but it is not total. God’s light shines on people like you and me, people who stumble blindly in the darkness.”

Willis stared straight ahead. "OK. What perplexes me is that the light shines on some of the people but not on others. Why have these people been elected to enjoy the privilege of standing in the light? Why has God's light risen on them? Is it because they are special or because they act better and differently?"

The young white man, the one they called Gaspar answered. "Look, you and I—all of us—were born in and raised in a culture of skepticism. We want evidence. We worship reason and logic. The gap between evidence and belief is what makes it possible for the skeptic to achieve more skepticism. Those of us who are not skeptics are what we are because we choose faith." He glowed with certainty. He acted as if he had summed up all the centuries of questing for faith.

Dorcas shot up from her bar stool. "I have never heard such learned crap in all my life! You guys are play-acting. Y'all are divorced from reality. Look out there on Roosevelt Road. Look at those people huddled in that bus stop on this cold January night. Do you think they give a rat's behind about this so-called theological discussion? I may know my Bible, but I expect you guys to know something about life."

Willis stood up, all six feet three of him, and his white hair positively shone in the light of the diner. "Calm down," he said. "There's an ancient story about a disciple who confronted a wise person. 'Where shall I look for enlightenment?' the disciple asked. 'Here,' the wise one said. 'When will it happen?' 'It is happening right now,' the wise one answered.

"Then why don't I experience it?' 'Because you don't look.'

"What should I look for?' 'Nothing. Just look.' 'Look at what?' 'At anything your eyes light on.'

"But must I look in a special way?' 'No, the ordinary way will do.' 'But don't I always look the ordinary way?' 'No, you don't.' 'But why not?'

"Because to look, you must be here. And you are mostly somewhere else.'

He paused. His face was solemn. Jake moved toward the door.

"I believe," he said, "that if we are going to find God, we have to be right here in the moment God has given. Not somewhere else.

"I have to go now. Thank you, Dorcas, for keeping us on track. Thank you, three Magi who came out of a dark January morning to enlighten us. I won't say Happy New Year. It's too hackneyed and common to say that. I will simply say: May God guide and bless you in this new year."

Jake closed the door and started north on Canal Street.