

January 2, 2005/Second Sunday after Christmas/David L. Edwards

Rise and Shine

Isaiah 60:1-6/Matthew 2:1-12

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

Last Monday morning Kaye and I were sitting together in the living room for meditation. I was reading the lessons for this Sunday, and when I came to the words of Isaiah, they suddenly struck me as an image of spiritual awakening. *Arise, shine! God's glory has risen upon you!* Similar words are found in every major religious tradition. They have to do with waking up to life, to God, to reality. Waking up from our sleepwalking, our daydreaming, and the nightmares we have created as human beings with our violence and greed, our fears and hatreds.

Through the prophet Isaiah God was trying to wake up people to a life of compassion, justice, and mercy. In Christ God was trying to wake up the world to the life of embodied love. We can use these weeks after Christmas to ponder all these things in our hearts, like Mary, and discover more deeply what it means for us as individuals and as a community to "arise and shine," to live as those upon whom God's light shines. When we make our commitment to Christ in discipleship, we embark on a journey of faithfulness supported by specific daily disciplines and practices. As we are faithful to this journey, the light begins to shine more and more in us. It is like the sunrise, faint in the beginning but growing until it fills the sky.

When we are engaged in this kind of spiritual life, our life becomes a journey of awakening—awakening to God's reality and nearness, awakening to the world around us as the creation of which we are integrally a part, and awakening to our own uniqueness and giftedness as human beings. Life becomes more joyful and purposeful. We are on the trail of what it is we are put on this earth to do and we must be about it without delay.

Two weeks ago I spoke with my friend Gale Weisman on the phone. We were to record a song that night for a CD the Disciples of Christ and U.C.C. women are putting together for an event in 2006. I wanted to find out if Gale, who is struggling with cancer, felt up to the session. When I asked him, his voice cracked with emotion: "David, we can't put it off." Here was an acute reminder that each of us needs to be about this spiritual life stuff with all seriousness and sense of urgency. Not out of fear or anxiousness. Not out of some half-baked religious notions of guilt. But out of the desire to live as fully as we are meant to live, with the

light of God burning at the center of our being and expressing itself through the ways we live our lives. We can't put it off. We can go through life sleepwalking. Or we can wake up. We can rise and shine with the light of God shining upon and in us.

*For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you.*

Here, I think, is a realistic picture of the context of the spiritual life. We are to live by the light of God right in the middle of a world that is terribly messed up. Just take a brief inventory of the past couple of weeks. The terrible and ungraspable devastation of the earthquake and tidal waves in southeastern Asia. The continuing bloodshed and wastefulness of the war in Iraq. The absurdities, such as our government's initial offering of \$35 million for tsunami relief while spending \$44 million on the president's inauguration party. Yes, it was later revised up, but the initial response told the truth about our leadership and about us as a nation obsessed with and addicted to our own wealth, power, and material surplus. When we are spiritually sensitive, there are times the world will seem utterly lost. And we will feel ourselves discouragingly wrapped up in it.

It is easy to get swamped by all the inanities and insanities that surround us and in which we are implicated as part of the human family. But still Isaiah says that God's light has risen upon us. Still Christ comes to us to call us to follow the way of light in the midst of darkness and confusion. That God's light has risen upon us doesn't mean that we are somehow favored by God. God's light is there for all to see and respond to. It is up to us human beings whether we continue to sleep or decide to wake up. The light is shining all over the place. It isn't just for Christians but is God's universal light and love shed over all people. We've turned it into a religious thing, made Christ into a possession, or worse, a weapon that we wield toward those of different spiritualities or faith traditions.

The stories of the nativity in Matthew and Luke are essentially about God's universal love, not the creation of a religion called Christianity. That's why Matthew makes such a big deal about the Gentiles, the outsiders, the magi being the ones who respond more readily to the light than do the "insiders," those who think they've got it. God's love breaks religious forms and strictures; it doesn't build them. Marvin Chandler is a retired Presbyterian minister and a jazz musician who lives in Indianapolis. In the liner notes of his Christmas CD, entitled *When A Child Is Born*, he writes: "I believe that Christmas is for everyone, and while the Christmas story is a beautiful story, within the context of Christian theology and Christian history it becomes exclusionary. That bothers me because I feel the birth of a child is a universal experience and its message affirms all people."

The world is a mix of darkness and light, suffering and joy, pain and pleasure. Sometimes it will be as though a pall has fallen over everything. We will be tempted to see everything as useless, purposeless, joyless, and senseless. We will want to give up, to go back to sleep. But we can always wake up, and if we are keeping ourselves on the journey of waking up, we begin to see more clearly that this is indeed God's world and we are God's beloved children and we can live our lives shining with God's own light.

Waking up isn't easy. It takes practice. It takes discipline. That is why our community holds up the call to a disciplined life of faith. But the discipline must never make us uptight and rigid. The purpose of spiritual discipline is to nurture spiritual awareness, to keep us waking up instead of going to sleep. So this new year offers us a renewing of our devotion to spiritual practices that can keep us waking up. Those expressed in "Our Covenant One with Another," the framework of membership adopted fifty years ago by this church, still serve us well:

- *daily prayer and the study of scripture

- *giving of our material possessions and our money

- *focusing on our relationships each day so that they become more forgiving and loving

- *of discerning and affirming the gifts we have from God, using them every day

- *following God's call in Christ to minister in some way either to our own community of faith or in the wider community and world

- *entering into deeper relationships with one another, finding ways to help each other to stay on this all important journey of waking up, what we call accountability.

These are not spiritual laws. They are not turning faith into legalism. They are the framework of a life that wants to keep on the journey of awakening more and more to God's light.

***Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.***

When all of this is happening, when we are waking up spiritually to who we really are, as individuals and as a community, then we DO shine with the light of God. We probably won't even be aware of it, except for the joy that will grow at the center of our being, the simple joy of being alive as God's creatures. We may feel like we're going nowhere, like were struggling every day just to keep awake, like we're the worst Christians in the world. We may be so sensitive to all the darkness around us in the world that our spirits have a hard time just keeping lit with some hope and love. But somehow others will see it in us—this light of God arising upon

us. It has nothing to do with the great things we accomplish, either the outward missions or the inward spiritual achievements. It just has to do with the fact that we are taking it all seriously, this call of Christ to follow him, and we're trying our best to wake up to life as God has made it and wants it to be.

Recently a visitor worshiped with us and lingered to talk with me afterwards. She was tearful as she spoke of how moved she was by our service, by this relatively small group of people trying to be as faithful as they can to God's call in their lives and by the simplicity of the worship of God. This is, I told her, the reason I came here—to be part of a group of people who take the spiritual life seriously and struggle with God's claim on their lives, the journey of spiritual awakening. Not all the things that have been accomplished. Those are only outgrowths of the most important and first thing—loving God with our whole being, struggling to wake up and stay awake to God's light in an often-dark world.

I remember Gordon Cosby saying this same thing at Bev's memorial service nearly three years ago. Bev was not first of all a social activist committed to peace and justice. For him everything arose out of his first loving God. And that's what this community is supposed to be about and that's what each of us needs to be about—loving God with our whole being. If we are doing that, if we are working with that each day, then we will be amazed at the way the light will shine and at the journey that unfolds before us. We will become so excited about living our lives in this light that we can't stand it. We will know increasingly what it means that God's light has risen upon us, marveling that this light can continue to shine on and in us right in the midst of the most difficult and discouraging of circumstances. Life will become full and meaningful in a way that makes sense out of that image of kings and nations coming to us, being drawn to the light that shines in and through us. Our lives will become full of a richness we never imagined possible. We will become a community and persons to whom others will be drawn because they see this light shining in us, refracted beautifully through our frailties and smallness, and through the ways we try to be faithful to the gifts God has given us and the call to use them for God's purposes. It all happens as we arise and shine with the light of God that has risen upon us and the world.

Let us pray: God of light, grant us the grace to turn toward you and work with renewed devotion to those practices that keep us turned toward your light. Keep us prayerful each day. Make us aware of the gifts you have given us and of your call to use them to enrich life around us. Above all, teach us how to live each day, each moment with the joy and hope that come from your light that has risen upon us in Jesus Christ, the light of your love filling our very being. Amen.