

with our inner life—looking patiently, coming to understand where we are bound, and gently loosening the knots.

So, Isaiah 58 is about **right effort**, what we can do in order to make our lives more “light sensitive,” you might say. Be about living a life of spiritual authenticity, both inwardly and outwardly. Get real, with your inward journey and your outward journey. Touch the reality of your own being—your struggles, pains, strengths, gifts, the whole reality of your being. Touch the reality of the people and world around you and the needs that are there. Be working with how your life can be a source of healing, feeding, uplifting, and liberating others. And if we are working with such things, we will discover light beginning to dawn, our own healing springing up, our darkness and gloom fleeing before the noonday sun. Our sense of despair and hopelessness so often is rooted in our not having searched for and found what God is calling and has gifted us to do for others. Whatever it is. Whether it seems to us big or small. It doesn’t matter. When we are letting our lives become sources of healing and help for others, then we will experience our light dawning in the darkness.

Yet the words of Isaiah 60 are also important to keep in mind. They are words of God’s **grace**. We can arise and shine because God’s light IS already dawning upon us. Indeed, God’s light has fully dawned in Jesus. This is the word of God’s gift of light and life that does not depend upon anything we are or are not, that we do or do not do. The light of God’s love and presence is simply there for us to see, to awaken to, and to live in with joyful and thankful spirits.

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God’s Light Dawning

Isaiah 58:6-10; 60:1-6

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

Arise, shine. Your light has come! These are stirring words to hear at this time of year. Today is Epiphany. The celebration of the visit of the magi to the child Jesus. The expanding of the gospel to the Gentile world. The universal scope of God’s love and light, falling upon all people regardless of race, nationality, situation in life, social or economic status, even religion!

The arising of God’s light is an image full of hope, a thrilling message that God’s light and love are like the rising of the morning sun, driving away the cold darkness of the night. Our reading from Isaiah for this week is from the 60th chapter. It speaks of that moment, that day when God’s light, God’s new day dawns upon all people. It is time to lift up heads and see the dawn. It is time when people return home from their distant exiles and wanderings. It is a time for joyful hearts because of the abundance of life. This may be, as the prophet says, because we experience abundance flowing into our life, or that we awaken to the abundance that has always been there. Because of our spiritual numbness, we have neglected to see it. Now our eyes are opened. We are waking up. It is a new day.

This passage is a wonderful image of spiritual awakening. It does not have to be about a particular historical event. It can be about seeing ourselves as those who need to and can wake up to the dawn of God’s light flooding into our own hearts. It is good to hear this passage as we continue to celebrate and meditate on the meaning of Jesus’ birth and his life. Jesus lived as a fully awakened child of God. His life, teachings, and ministry, even his suffering and death, all had the purpose of helping us to wake up to life lived in the dawn of God’s light. That’s the meaning of the word “repent.” It doesn’t mean what American revivalism made it mean—some kind of miserable experience of crushing guilt that propels us into a so-called “conversion.” Repentance means literally “changing our minds” or getting a “new mind.” When Jesus took up John the Baptist’s preaching of repentance, I think he meant, “Wake up! The kingdom of God is dawning, is at hand. Don’t you see it?”

So the words of Isaiah 60 are a kind of wake up call. Arise! Shine! Look around you and see the light of God shining on everything and everyone, even in your own heart. And then live like an awakened person. Live in the light of God, for it is shining everywhere.

However, it occurred to me that Isaiah 60 also needs Isaiah 58. There the prophet speaks a slightly different word. It is also about light dawning in and upon our lives, but the light dawns as we live as certain way.

The prophet begins by talking about Israel's spiritual questioning: Why do we fast, but you, O God, do not see? Why do we humble ourselves, but you do not notice? In other words, we are doing all these religious things—worship, fasting, prayers—but we don't feel your presence. We are building all these churches. We are packing in the crowds. We think of ourselves as righteous and holy. Why don't we feel any closer to God? Why do we still feel spiritually empty?

Then Isaiah conveys God's response to Israel, the people and their leaders: You fast and go about your worship only to quarrel and fight and pick at each other. You use the religious life as an avoidance of seeing how your life oppresses others and a way of distancing yourself from life and its struggles. You are expecting to see my light, my presence without making any effort to LIVE in the light.

The kind of fast I choose is to loose the bonds of injustice, to untie the yokes that keep people from being free. My kind of worship is to share your food with those who don't have enough and to provide homes for those who are homeless, even your own home. Clothe the naked. Don't withdraw yourself from people, especially your own kin. That one has always made me wonder: Isn't that kind of selfish, to focus on those of our own family, those closest to us, and not the stranger? Then I think: If I can't live in a peaceful, just, and generous way with those closest to me, how can I expect to do so with strangers? In other words, live in such a way that you benefit others, that you use your life for the wellbeing and care and freedom of others.

If you are doing those things, says God through Isaiah, THEN you will experience enlightenment, then you will experience your own healing, your own wholeness. You will feel God's protective presence. Whenever you call, God will answer. When you cry for help, God will be there as your help. Feeding the hungry and meeting the needs of the suffering results in your light rising in the darkness, your gloom becoming like the noonday sun. So, how we

live our lives seems to have an effect on God's light dawning in our lives. As our lives "arise and shine," we might say, God's light shines on us.

Talking about peace and justice and compassion does not generate any light unless we ourselves are peaceful, just, and compassionate persons in all our relationships. We experience the light and nearness of God as we give ourselves to specific ministries to persons suffering from lack of peace and justice. Our complaining about the lack of compassion and love in our culture and world only makes us more miserable and miserable to be with! However, when we are working with our own spiritual lives, nurturing the growth of compassion and love in ourselves and our concrete relationships with people around us, then we become people of light.

I think these words from Isaiah 58 also speak to our inward journey, the inward dimension of our spiritual lives. If our relationship with God does not seem real or vital, if we find ourselves feeling distant from God and from life, it may have to do with our not working with a regular spiritual practice—daily times of silence, meditation, prayer, readings, reflection on our inner life. That is why the Church of the Covenant has always held up the importance of a regular and disciplined spiritual life. We don't expect someone to perform well in a sport, in studies, or in a job without a measure of self-discipline. How can we expect ourselves to touch, nurture, and deepen our lives as spiritual beings if we do not work with some measure of a regular spiritual practice? The relationship with God with which we were born needs to be attended to, brought into our awareness on a continuing basis. That's why it is so important to be in a mission group or some relationship of accountability. Sharing our spiritual lives with others helps us to keep on track, to maintain and grow in our spiritual practice. Otherwise, our tendency is to drift back into neglect and lethargy and the illusion that we are what we think we are—very spiritual people!

On this, I found an image coming into my mind. It is the bit about undoing the thongs of the yoke. Sometimes our inner life gets all tangled, a real mess. The time we devote to looking into our own spirits helps us identify the knots that are inside us. It is like what happens sometimes when you are fishing. You make this great cast, and all of a sudden your line is a real tangled mess. We call it a "bird's nest." There's no way to quickly undo it. You have to have patience and work gently to get it undone. If you rush or try too hard, you make it worse. But by gently, patiently seeing where the knots are and loosening them, the line comes free again. I think that is how we need to work