

January 6, 2013 / Epiphany / David L. Edwards

Arise! Shine! Wake Up!

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 that can deeply touch us about the spiritual life in its inward and outward dimensions. Today is Epiphany, when we listen to the story of the Gentile magi from the far East seeking and finding the child Jesus. 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! As Vince Sawyer's bumper sticker says: God Bless the World, No Exceptions! The arising of God's light is an image of never-dimming hope, a thrilling message that God's light and love are always there, like the rising of the morning sun, illuminating the darkness.

In our reading from Isaiah 60, the prophet speaks to the exiled people of Israel who are on the threshold of returning home. They still feel in the dark, but the light is about to dawn. After exile and suffering there will be a liberation, a restoration of their lives. These words have meaning beyond a certain point in history. They speak of moments when we lift up our heads and see the dawn, when we return home from our distant exiles and wanderings, whatever and wherever they might be. The words speak of illuminated and joy-filled hearts as we experience the abundance of life. It was always been there, but because of some outward or inward condition of our lives, we had lost sight of it, or took it for granted. It is like so many people I've known through the years who went through the death of a loved one, or a serious personal illness. And in that emotional darkness they were tended to in many ways by others in their congregation. When they came through it all, they would say something like, "I didn't know there was such love." It was there, all the time, but now it is seen and known by an open heart.

This passage provides a vibrant image for the spiritual life. It calls us to wake up to the dawn of God's light flooding into our own hearts. We 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, and 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 true meaning of the word "repent." Repentance (*metanoia*) means literally changing our minds,

going in a different direction, or getting a “new mind.” Anthony De Mello, a Jesuit priest who drew from his Indian Hindu/Buddhist culture, says it means “wake up”. When Jesus took up John the Baptist’s preaching of repentance, I think he meant, “Wake up! The kingdom of God is dawning, is all around you, even within you. Don’t you see it yet?”

So the words of Isaiah 60 are a wakeup call. Arise! Shine! Look around you and in you, and see the light of God shining on everything and everyone, and in your own heart. Live in the light of God, for it is shining everywhere.

However, Isaiah 60 needs Isaiah 58. There the prophet speaks a slightly different word. It is also about light dawning in our lives, but the light dawns as we live in certain ways.

The prophet begins with 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, but we don’t feel your presence. We are building all these churches. We are packing in the crowds. We think of ourselves as religious, and talk about it all the time. Why don’t we feel any closer to God? Why do we still feel so spiritually empty? Why doesn’t it feel real?

Isaiah says that God’s response is this: You fast and go about your worship only to quarrel and fight and criticize and judge—point the finger at--each other. You use the religious life to avoid seeing how your life harms others. You are expecting to see my light, my presence, without making any effort to LIVE in the light, without changing anything in the way you live.

God then says: Here is my kind of fast. Loose the bonds of injustice. Untie the yokes that oppress people. My kind of worship is to share with those who don’t have enough, and to make sure everyone has a home and enough to wear. Don’t withdraw yourself from people, especially your own kin. That one always seemed to me a bit selfish, to focus on those of our own family, those closest to us. Then I think: If I can’t live in a peaceful, caring, just, and generous way with those closest to me, how can I expect to do so with strangers? We have just gone through the Christmas holiday, a traditional family gathering time. The fuzzy and warm picture of family gatherings is nice, but the reality is often the opposite. It is easier to love those outside our families than those closest to us. We know them too well. There’s too much family history, marked by conflicts, hurts, disappointments, and other painful stuff. So maybe learning how to love those nearest to us, in our families or our church community or mission group, is the training ground for loving those who are at some distance. It’s not either/or. It’s both/and.

The point is, says Isaiah, strive to live in ways that benefit others, using your life to

enhance the well-being and freedom of others—beginning with those closest to you. 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 once again feel God’s protective presence. Whenever you call, God will answer. When you seek help, God will be there as your help. So, how we live our lives affects how, or whether, we see or experience God’s light dawning in our lives. We are living our way into awareness of God. As our lives “arise and shine,” we might say, God’s light shines on us.

We are a culture filled with God-talk, religious talk. After the killings at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, it was stupefying to hear some say they knew exactly why it happened: We’ve taken God out of the schools! First, what a pitiful notion of God, that we can cart God around, putting God here, and kicking God out there. Poor old, helpless God! What we call “God” is the Presence and Power of life itself that is everywhere and in everything. How do you “remove” God from anything or anywhere? Second, for all of this public discourse about God and religion, we are a culture obsessed with and addicted to weapons and violence, and systemically neglectful of the physical and mental health needs of our fellow citizens, especially children and the poor. If we were working toward real changes in those areas, then we would have no problem experiencing and knowing the reality and presence of God, and we would not even feel the need to talk about it! Then our light would shine in the darkness, and our darkness would become as noonday! The sense of the reality of God would be no problem!

Talking about peace and justice and compassion generates light as we are becoming the peaceful, just, and compassionate persons we are created to be. So, these words from Isaiah 58 and 60 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 likely has to do with our not working with a regular spiritual practice—daily times of silence, meditation, prayer, readings, reflection, growth in self-awareness. 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. Maintaining a disciplined spiritual practice in-season and out, when things are well and when they are not, in high spirits and in emotional and spiritual deserts, builds up in us a depth and fullness of faith that sustains us

throughout our lives. And the light dawns brighter and brighter.

Part of our inward journey practice is becoming more honestly, yet compassionately, self-aware. I was especially struck by the bit about “taking away from you the pointing of the finger”. I translate that as being critical of others, judging them, always measuring them against some ideal I have, some way I think they should be. And, of course, I know what is best for everyone else! Does this make me happy? Does it help others become better people? No to both questions. How do I, we, take away the pointing of the finger? By honestly looking into ourselves and why we persist in something that does not make us or others happy, or better people. It may be that I am always pointing the finger at myself, being so hard on myself that I project it on everyone else, as well. I want them to be as miserable as I am! It may be some past hurts or expectations that got disappointed, and the illusion I cling to that my happiness depends on how others act. It may be that my tendency to judge and measure others is a way to avoid living my own life freely, because I am afraid of failure or I am not yet sure what I am called to do. Whatever it is, we cannot make much progress in becoming people of peace, compassion, justice, and so forth without the insight into ourselves that comes through our inward journey work. As we, without judging or condemning ourselves, grow in self-understanding, we can begin to let things go. Love and light have more room in us.

So, Isaiah 58 is about **right effort**, what we need to 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 our inward journey and our outward journey. Touch and embrace the reality of our own life—our struggles, pains, strengths, gifts, the whole reality of our being. Touch the reality of the people and world around us and the needs that are there, and the ones to which we may feel called. See our lives as 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 flee as we begin to perceive and affirm what God is calling and has gifted us to be and do in the service of life. 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 receive, to awaken to, and to live in with joyful and thankful spirits.