

February 9, 2014 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

The Light of the World: Who We Really Are

Isaiah 58:1-12 *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly....*

Psalm 112 *[Those who fear the Lord] rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.*

Matthew 5:13-20 *"You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."*

Our readings for today are full of light images, and they all apply to us! In the psalm, those who "fear the Lord," that is, who live with reverent awareness and love of God, are lights illuminating others' lives. They are gracious, merciful, and concerned for right dealings with others. Through the prophet Isaiah, God tells the people of Israel and their leaders that when they feed the hungry, house the homeless, show mercy and compassion, then their light will become like dawn. If they are doing those things, the presence of God will be real and vital. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples, with the crowd listening in, that they are the salt of the earth. They are also the light of the world, and need to let their light shine forth so that others see and give glory to God. The message is quite simple: Our truest nature is like salt and light, and when we are in touch with and live out of who we really are, we preserve and illuminate life around us.

Sadly, this has not been the primary message of the church through the centuries. Instead of hearing that they are lights created to shine in the world, people have been told they have an inner darkness called "original sin." We are born sinners, can do nothing good on our own, and need a "savior" to come and make us something we are not -- acceptable to God. Rather than know and trust our created goodness, we have been taught to distrust, and, in the extreme, to hate ourselves. The problem is that Jesus never talked that way, and most of scripture does not talk that way. There are a few places in Hebrew and Christian scriptures from which such a view might be constructed, but it is something minor, and completely misses the life-giving, life-affirming, and empowering core of our spiritual tradition.

Growing up in the church, I became aware of a contradiction. On the one hand, I heard, at times, the message that we are no-good sinners who have to be "saved". That was the meaning of Jesus' death. God paid the price with the death of "his" son so that our sins would be forgiven. I heard that message--though not from my father's sermons--and sang hymns about it, but it never made any sense to me. What a terrible picture of God--a parent who would will the death of a child as some kind of sacrifice. No wonder people reject such a message and such a God! Me, too!

I began to realize that the church had misrepresented things. Jesus died "for" our sins was the message. Yet, in the few places where scripture speaks in this way, the translation can just as well be, Jesus died "because of" our sins. That I can understand! It makes perfect sense that Jesus' death happened because he threatened the status quo in politics and religion and culture. He revealed the emptiness of power and violence and material wealth. He told people to love their enemies, not kill them. He denounced violence in all its forms. He said that the ultimate meaning of our lives has to do with caring for others, not believing this or that doctrine. He talked about THIS life and God's kingdom coming ON EARTH, not going to heaven. As our friend Michael Morwood has said, Jesus "didn't give a rip about heaven." Jesus was concerned about THIS life and how we live it, and that's what got him in trouble.

However, I grew up in a church tradition that valued the freedom of persons to think for themselves, to read scripture for themselves, and decide what they thought; a church that sounded God's call in Jesus to live a life of prayer and service, to be part of the healing of life; a church that supported and engaged in amazing work in our own and other nations to improve the lives of the poor, the sick, the hungry, the uneducated. If all of this was going on, I wondered, how come we are worthless, terrible sinners who can do nothing good? Here was a different picture of Jesus, one that harmonized with what I heard and read in the gospels. He was the one who showed us who we really and truly are, the pioneer of the life of faith, as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote, who went before us and showed us the way. He called us to touch and live out our true identities as God's beloved daughters and sons. He was the one who looked on us with forgiveness and compassion, because we DO get lost and live in ways contrary to how we are created and meant to live. Jesus was the one who teaches and empowers us in the right ways of living. To me, the crucifixion came to mean

that the power structures were able to kill Jesus, but they could not do away with him! Everything he was about was too true, too powerful, too life-giving to die.

Reading the scripture lessons for today, I was aware, once again, that we have been conditioned to read scripture in ways that blind us to what is all over its pages. We are people created by God to live together in justice, compassion, generosity, and peace. We can do it because we are made that way. Isaiah's point is that people have gotten lost in religion. They are doing the right religious things, but they have stopped being human! The people are complaining about spiritual emptiness. We pray and worship and fast, and we aren't experiencing God. Where is God? How can I experience God's presence and healing and reality?

Through Isaiah comes the answer: God is not found by being religious, but in true spirituality, that is, life lived in harmony with our created nature, with who we truly are as human beings. Says God, Your religious fast is not what I'm looking for! The fast that gets my attention is when you live in compassion, justice, mercy, love, and peace, when you open yourself to some need in the world, when you step out of your self-protective shell and reach out to others, when you stop judging and measuring others, and pay attention to who you are and how you are living. Then your light will shine! Then you will light up with the reality and nearness of God. Then you will know what it means to be whole. Then you will call to God and God will answer right away: Here I am! When we are engaged in BOTH the inward journey of prayer, worship, study, meditation, reflection, AND the outward journey of touching some need in the world around us, THEN we will know, with increasing clarity and intimacy, the reality and presence of God. No problem!

Isaiah and all the other prophets of Israel do not assume that people are born separated from God, unable to live as they are meant to live. They assume that people are created by God to live in life-giving ways and can choose to do so. We need to talk about the reality of sin, but not as some corrupt nature in us. Sin is getting lost from the paths of right living. Sin is forgetting who we really are. Sin is continuing in actions and patterns of thinking that bring harm to others, the creation, and ourselves, buying into values that go against who we really are. Sin is what happens in our legislatures when budgets are slashed so that the most vulnerable people suffer, while the wealthiest and most powerful continue to gain. Isaiah speaks God's word to Israel so that the people and their leaders might come to their

senses and live as they were created to live. As they do that, their light will rise like the dawn.

Jesus is saying the same thing. You are the salt of the earth. You have it in you to be a kind of preservative. Kaye's parents in Kentucky talked about "old ham". That meant ham that had been salt cured, sometimes for years. I remember the story of someone who unearthed a ham from the days of the Civil War, and it was still edible! Jesus did not go into detail about this image of our being salt. He leaves it to our imaginations, to think about ways we can preserve and add flavor to life. Whatever it means, it is a positive image meant to affirm and inspire us. But, says Jesus, we CAN lose our saltiness, that quality that makes us such persons. We can squander it through neglect, or we can choose to think and act in ways that are destructive to life. Losing our saltiness is something else Jesus leaves for us to contemplate.

You are the light of the world. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket, but on a stand so that it gives light to the whole house. Let your light shine so that people can see your good works and give glory to God. It does not get much more positive than that! We are light and made to be light. We are not meant to live with a sense of shame and hiding, no matter what others or the world tell us about ourselves. We are to let the light of our lives shine in the world. Not so that we get credit for anything, or that we are somehow earning spiritual points, but so that others can see the light in themselves, and let their light shine!

Our true nature is goodness, light, compassion, justice, mercy. That is who we really are. There is no doubt that life in this world makes us forget who we truly are. This is why the vision of our community is so important. We make a commitment to our own lives as people of faith, working daily with an inward journey of remembering and being aware of God and our true selves—our salt-and-light selves. We work with an outward journey of expressing God's love for the world through the particular callings and gifts God gives us. The underlying assumption of this community is that we are created good, made for preserving and flavoring life, for being and sharing light, and we are able to be and become the persons God made us to be. It is not easy. It takes attention and work, sometimes hard struggle inwardly and outwardly. Yet it is a journey undergirded by God's grace, God's unconditional love for us. It is the journey of discovering, knowing, and being who we really and truly are, for our own sake and the sake of the world.