

### **Your Light Shall Break Forth**

It was a bleak time for the people addressed by the prophet Isaiah, in the words we heard in our reading from Hebrew Scripture. The book of Isaiah was actually written by three different prophets in three different time periods. Our reading comes from Third Isaiah, at a time just after the Jewish exiles in Babylon had returned to the land of Judah. Although they were no longer living in exile, their return had not resulted in the glorious restoration promised by Second Isaiah. Life for the returnees remained very harsh, and they questioned whether God was still with them.

The people made a great show of seeking God, *as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God*. They practiced rituals of penitential fasting, wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes, and then demanded of God, “*Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves but you do not notice?*” God responds that they fast to serve their own interests— like the proponents of the modern “prosperity gospel” they want God to help them prosper— even while they continue to oppress their workers and strike the weak *with a wicked fist*.

This is *not* the kind of fast God wants. Instead, God asks, *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin* (for whom we have a particular responsibility)?

One of the things that can happen to the followers of any religion, is that we can fall into the mistaken belief that following rules and rituals is good enough. We can practice the outward forms prescribed by tradition, and our religious authorities, and think that this is all that is needed to be a good Christian, or Jew, or Muslim, or whatever. Isaiah tells us that God has no use for religious observance that is not accompanied by justice and compassion for others.

Dorotheos of Gaza, a sixth-century Christian monk and abbot, also pointed out the necessary relationship between love for God and love for our neighbor, using the image of a spoked wheel. Picture humankind as the rim of the wheel and God as the hub. And now picture the spokes as the multiple paths by which we draw closer to God. As we move nearer to God, along the spokes, we also draw closer to one another.

This is the ideal, but it isn't always the reality. Stories in the news and personal experience tell us that those who claim the label, and practice the rituals and outward forms of their religion, don't necessarily treat others with compassion and justice. In the mid-eighties, I took part in the Vermont Walk for Justice and Peace, which began at Weston Priory and ended in Burlington.

One of the speakers at the opening ceremony was a man from South Africa, who had been jailed and tortured during the struggle against apartheid. He had been a Christian, he told us. But he lost his faith, one Sunday, when his torturers interrupted their infliction of pain in order to attend church. As soon as church was over, his tormenters returned and took up where they had left off. He could no longer believe in a God who allowed such injustice, or be a part of a religion that did so little to change the hearts of those who practiced it.

I think that Dorotheos of Gaza would say to this man that, although his torturers claimed to be Christian, they were not following the way of Christ. Their practice of Christian worship had not made them more compassionate and brought them closer to others, and therefore closer to God. It had not changed their hearts. You see, the wheel image works both ways. If we are not growing in our love and compassion for others, we really need to question ourselves about how we're doing at drawing closer to God. It's like the question posed, I believe, by G. K. Chesterton: *If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?*

Isaiah tells us that the religious observance God wants is to free the oppressed, feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked, and acknowledge the claims of our kin, (and I would add that drawing closer to God involves an ever-widening understanding of those who are our "kin"). Whenever we do these things, Isaiah tells us, our *light shall break forth like the dawn*.

Jesus uses the image of light, in the first part of our gospel passage, to tell his followers who they should be: *You are the light of the world*. Jesus' followers were also living in a bleak time, suffering under the yoke of Roman oppression and questioning whether God was still with them. And yet, here is God-with-them, in the most visible and accessible way, in the person of Jesus, who challenges them to join his vision of what it means to be in right relationship with God and to share this vision with the world.

It's important to note that when Jesus says, "*You are the light of the world*," the word "you" is plural while the word "light" is singular: "*You (plural) are the light (singular) of the world*." The "you" is corporate—it is the community as a whole that is challenged to be light for the world. Even though each of us is called individually to be such a light, it is the light of all his followers—the followers who would become the church—that Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus also tells his followers, "*You are the salt of the earth*." "Salt of the earth" has come to be used as a term for people who are good, honest, down-to-earth. But, according to commentator Douglas Hare, in its original usage, it meant something more like: "*You are the red hot pepper for the earth*." In other words, Jesus was telling his followers, "*You must add zest to the life of the whole world*." As scholar Kathryn Matthews reflects on Hare's interpretation, *It's powerful to think of that tiny bit of flavoring—a single courageous voice, a community of lively faith—making a difference in a much larger entity, that is, a world gone madly cynical and distracted with that which does not feed our souls*.

So how can the church be the light and how can we add zest to the life of the world? Hare tells us that we must understand our light as a derived light: *The church needs to remember constantly that is in fact not the light itself but only the window through which the light is to be seen.* And, like a city built on a hill, our light must be visible for the whole world to see. *The church's good works are to function in the secular world as indelibly etched pictures of [God's] love,* Hare writes.

But what does this light look like, how can we draw *indelibly etched pictures* of God's love? How can *this* community be light and zest for the life of the world? What “indelibly etched pictures of God's love” have already been drawn here, and what pictures might you be called to draw for the future?

Last week, at our monthly Interim Ministers meeting, Associate Conference Minister, Pam Lucas, shared with us “11 Facts About Vital UCC Congregations.” These come, Pam tells us, (Keeping in Touch, VT Conference e-newsletter) from *what the United Church of Christ learned from our most vital and vibrant churches and pastors. Churches that were large and small and in between. Churches that were rural, suburban and urban. Churches in every geographic area of the country.* Vital UCC congregations:

- 1) Make a real difference in the lives of their members and the wider community,
- 2) are not necessarily growing numerically,
- 3) work for Social Justice,
- 4) are willing to meet new challenges,
- 5) take advantage of programs offered by the denomination,
- 6) are clear about their mission,
- 7) hold prayer and study groups,
- 8) have strong stewardship and organization practices,
- 9) train lay leaders,
- 10) hold worship that is joyful, innovative, inspiring, and thought-provoking,
- 11) value fellowship and evidence love for one another.

One of the first tasks of our new Church Board is to look at all the information we gathered this past summer, along with useful research, like these 11 Facts About Vital UCC congregations, and then propose some ways in which this congregation might become even stronger in letting its light shine and in adding zest to the world. Like the people of Isaiah's time, and Jesus' time, we, too, are living in a bleak time. Now, more than ever, it is important for us to listen for God's leading, and to draw those who are feeling lost, confused, and in despair, in the words of Madeleine L'Engle, *by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.*

Like a *city built on a hill that cannot be hid*, I pray that this church, built on a hill, will let its *light shine forth before others, so that they may see your good works*, and the rightness of your relationships, and so be drawn to the brightness of your witness and the warmth of your glow.