

- I. Light - Big theme and motif of the season of Epiphany
 - A. From the Wise One's star, to the blinding light of Jesus at the Transfiguration
 - B. Our seasonal canticle: Arise, shine, for your light has come!
 - 1. Text from Isaiah chapter 60 - following close on today's reading.
 - C. Other Scripture texts, hymns, prayers. Our Eucharistic preface: "Because in the mystery of the Word made flesh, you have caused a new light to shine in our hearts."
 - D. There's a lot of light and dark imagery in Scripture - and we have to be a little careful of it, because two thousand years of history have layered some additional meanings onto the word *dark*.
 - 1. In particular: several centuries of exploitation and domination of people with darker skin by people with lighter skin
 - a) Part of the cultural validation: casting *darkness* as ignorance, savagery, lack. *Dark* not just the absence of literal light, but a moral and intellectual characteristic of some kinds of humans.
 - b) Unwise to ignore that, and impossible to simply peel it away and say "that's not what we mean."
 - 2. But it seems pretty clear that in the Bible itself, we're talking about the fundamental human experience of light and dark, as animals who depend heavily on sight. Sometimes dark is cozy and comforting - but sometimes dark makes us feel disoriented and scared. We don't know where we are, and we don't know what's going to happen to us.
 - a) Shorthand or metaphor for times that feel like that: *Behold, darkness covers the land, deep gloom enshrouds the peoples.*
 - b) So what, then, is *light* a shorthand or symbol for, in Scripture? Texts this week offer some answers.

II. Isaiah 58

- A. From a part of the book of the Prophet Isaiah that seems to have been written after some of God's people returned to their homeland after exile in Babylon
 - 1. Probably by some other prophet writing in Isaiah's name and very much in his prophetic and theological tradition
 - 2. Seems to be addressing a question arising from among the people: We're trying to follow our ancestors' faith; we're fasting and making sacrifices and so on; but it's taking a long time to rebuild Jerusalem from the ruins, and people aren't getting along, and things still just seem really hard!

- B. The prophet's response: Your "righteousness" is only skin deep! You think you're doing what God wants when you fast, pray, eat the right foods and so on, but you are *fundamentally missing the point*.
1. About fasting - unfamiliar to some. A practice of abstention - of not doing something. In the Biblical context:
 - a) Any food - often dawn to dusk, sometimes longer.
 - b) Certain foods; for example, alcohol or meat.
 - c) Behaviors - like physical intimacy, or celebration.
 - d) Physical comfort and normalcy - "sackcloth and ashes": wearing rough clothes, discomfort, looking strange.
 - e) Could be individual or communal
 - f) Why fast? Repentance; pleading for something from God; grief; or as a way to show commitment to do something.
 - (1) Saul: commanded his troops to fast until a particular victory, with the result that their strength slowly ebbed.
 - g) A few really interesting examples of corporate fasting in times of national emergency - danger of invasion or disaster.
 2. Isaiah's take on fasting: God doesn't want a fast that's done to impress people with your piety - or to excuse fighting because you're hungry. God wants to see people's lives transformed towards mercy, generosity, and justice: feeding the hungry, housing the houseless, freeing the enslaved and oppressed.
 - a) An interesting word: *yoke*.
 - (1) You might think of oxen - yoke: heavy piece of wood shaped so that they can draw heavy loads.
 - (2) There yokes for humans, to put weight on the shoulders.
 - (3) I suspect the yokes here are both literal and metaphorical: freeing people (and maybe animals too?) from bondage, physical servitude and drudgery.
 - (a) Jesus in Matthew chapter 11: "Come to me, all you who are carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest; for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."
- C. Culmination: what will happen, if people heed the prophet's call?
1. Beautiful text: "Your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday... God will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden... Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the Repairer of the breach, the Restorer of streets to live in."

- a) “Breach” - not a common word - the break in the city wall that let the enemies in, that made the city fall. What needs to be mended for there to be safety and wholeness again.
 - b) The Message, a version of the Bible that puts it into more ordinary words, says the last part this way: "You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.”
2. This isn't the prosperity Gospel - the dangerous and irresponsible teaching that if you please God (probably by sending some particular televangelist a generous donation), then God will solve all your problems and you'll be healthy, wealthy, and happy.
- a) Rather: A promise of SHARED flourishing. Remove oppression exploitation, cruelty and scapegoating from among you, meet people's needs, and beautiful things will happen. What was lost will be restored, and more; what you long for will come to fruition, and more.
 - b) A transformation not about *you* or *me* but about *us*, about a people, a nation, even an ecology, as a whole.

III. Reading Isaiah 58 this year, can't help thinking of the Twin Cities, just up the road.

- A. Listen: this is not an easy time to be a preacher. I know there are folks who'd like me to say less about our national situation, for all kinds of reasons. I know there are folks who'd like me to say more. I know there are folks who have their own struggles and sadnesses and just need consolation and peace; and folks who are angry and afraid and need to feel grounded in faith and community.
1. I can't preach all those sermons at once. I'm trying to follow where Scripture and the Spirit lead me... & this week the Scriptures seem to speak pretty clearly.
- B. Many of us have seen or read the text that begins, “First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Communist.” The same happens with the socialists, then the trade unionists, then the Jews. Finally, the poet writes, they came for me - and there was no one left to speak out.
1. It's based on a confession written by German Lutheran pastor and theologian Martin Niemöller, in 1946.

- a) Early on in the rise of the Third Reich, Niemöller had supported the movement, but he later became a member of the Confessing Church, the alliance of churches and leaders who resisted white supremacist Christianity in Nazi Germany.
 - b) After the war, Niemöller felt deeply that he and others like him should have resisted harder and louder. He wrote the “First they came” piece as a confession, a self-reproach.
2. I’ve seen a kind of joke going around, a riff on Niemöller’s text: “First they came for the immigrants, and we spoke up, because we’ve read the effing poem.”
- a) But I think there’s more to it than that. People aren’t just standing up for their immigrant neighbors because they’re afraid they’ll be next. I think we’re seeing a whole lot of people genuinely, deeply choosing community, choosing solidarity.
3. A word that’s all over the place in MN - on signs, in songs and interviews: Neighbor. Such a holy, powerful, important word!
- a) Makes me think of blessed Fred Rogers and his memorable invitation into neighbor-hood.
 - b) And of Jesus, whom Fred Rogers knew well, and what Jesus said when somebody once asked him, “So... the Law says I have to love my neighbor. But who is my neighbor? Where’s the line, beyond which God says I don’t have to love people any more?” And Jesus tells a story which lands here: You become a neighbor when you show mercy. When you see a need, and respond with compassion. There’s no line - or: the line is only ever inside your heart, not in God’s perspective.
 - c) Our upper midwest neighbors in the Twin Cities, who are marching and keeping vigil and singing and delivering groceries and paying rent and keeping watch at schools and meeting released detainees with coats and hot cocoa - they’ve been incredibly clear about their choice to love their neighbors, regardless of skin color, national origin, or immigration status.
- (1) A recent description from a visitor to the Twin Cities, noticing how even in a crowd on the streets, people are so careful of one another: “These little gestures, this attitude of solidarity and goodwill. This broadcasting of focused interest in the well being of others. It’s so concentrated, so prevalent, so staggering.”

- (2) Atlantic article: “The forces of disconnection in American life today are strong... [But in Minnesota], over and over, regular people have said, sometimes at the barrel of a gun, These are our neighbors. We claim them.”
 - (3) Singing Resistance movement - song: “No one is getting left behind this time. We get there together, or not at all.”
 - (4) And not just MN; lots of places. People starting to connect, plan, wonder in Dane County too. What will actively loving our neighbors look like for us, in the months ahead?
4. This past week in the Twin Cities, a new tactic to reclaim residential streets where ICE has been patrolling often, creating terror for residents: Block parties to slow traffic. A friend posted a photo - a spread of food (from home-smoked ribs to Central American pastries), a couple of portable fire pits, and cornhole.
 - a) Just a bunch of folks standing out in the snow together - people of all origins; all Minnesotan now.
 - b) Restorers of streets to live in, indeed.
 5. I don’t want to romanticize Minnesota; people are exhausted, drained, yearning for normalcy, struggling under the strain of constant vigilance, the sense of threat, of not doing enough. This is a terrible thing to have to go through.
 - a) But an experience can be ennobling and exhausting at the same time. In weariness, in frustration, in fear, people are choosing community. People are claiming their neighbors.
- C. **Light** in this Isaiah text: part of what’s promised if people are brave and loving enough to change their hearts and lives, together: “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn... then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”
1. You’ll be able to see where to go, fear and uncertainty lifted.
 2. And others will be able to see you, and be drawn to you.

IV. Resonance with our Gospel - Jesus’ call to be light and salt.

- A. Jesus plays with both metaphors a little bit, but doesn’t really unpack them - leaves it for his followers, then and now, to unpack what it means for us to be light and salt in our time and place.
 1. I’ve preached on salt before. Salt makes food taste good; it kills bacteria; it cleans wounds and preserves food; it can be used to melt ice.

2. About light, Jesus offers a basic fact: if you're trying to light a room with one small oil lamp, then you don't want to put it under a basket. You want to put it on some kind of stand, and somewhat central - so people can see it, and see by it.
 3. He says this silly thing about a bushel basket - a big basket that would be used in collecting grain. Why would you light a lamp and then put a basket over it? That doesn't even make sense.
- B. Martin Niemöller preached on this text not long before he was arrested by the Nazis, in 1937. He helped me think of that bushel basket in a new way.
1. Earlier in the service, he had read out a list of the names of church members missing or arrested. In his sermon, he says, "When I read out the names, a little while ago*, did we not think: 'Alas and alack, will this wind, this storm, that is going through the world just now, not blow out the Gospel candle? We must therefore take the message in out of the storm and put it in a safe nook.'"
 2. He continues, "It is only during these days that I have realized - that I have understood - what the Lord Jesus Christ means when He says: "Do not take up the bushel [basket]! I have not lit the candle for you to put it under the bushel, in order to protect it from the wind. Away with the bushel! The light should be placed upon a candlestick! It is not your business to worry about whether the light is extinguished or not by the draft. We are not to worry whether the light is extinguished or not; that is His concern: we are only to see that the light is not hidden away - hidden away perhaps with a noble intent, so that we may bring it out again in calmer times - [but] no: 'Let your light shine before [all people]!'"
 3. For Niemöller and his church, responding to Christ's call to be a light for the world meant continuing to speak and act from a bold conviction of God's love for all people, in opposition to supremacist Christianity, even when such proclamation and action put the faithful community at risk. Not letting even real and imminent threat push them to hide their light under the bushel basket of fear.

- V. “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.” “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.”
- VI. I want to circle back to Isaiah, and to fasting for shared flourishing.
- A. It’s a week and a half till Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent - traditionally a time of fasting for Christians.
1. Ash Weds liturgy: “The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting.”
 2. What’s the point of a fast? I think that when you fast from something, you are showing God and yourself that you are willing and able to change your habits, to do something different, to let something go or take something on, in order to move towards your intentions, and what you understand as God’s intentions.
 3. Important to say that fasting in our culture is strongly associated with food; that’s not what I mean by it here. Fasting has always had broader meanings - taking on new habits, or restricting a behavior you want to dial back.
 - a) Lots of people fast from social media during Lent. A couple of years ago I tried to minimize my plastic use in Lent.
 - b) Taking on something new - a new practice, habit, or commitment - can also be a fast because you have to make room for it somehow. None of our lives are not full, one way or another. You have to let go of something, to make room for something else.
 4. A good time to think about your Lenten fast this year - perhaps in the spirit of Isaiah’s call to a collective fast for justice and mercy, for restoration and human flourishing.
 - a) Fasts always have carve-outs for the sick, the frail, nursing mothers, etc. Put on your own oxygen mask first, beloveds.
 - b) But if you can breathe freely, consider asking yourself: how could I make a little more room for the common good, this Lent? What could that look like for me and my household?
 - c) So that our gloom may become like the noonday; so that we may, all together, someday, earn those beautiful names: Repairers of the breach, Restorers of streets to live in.

Atlantic article quoted above:

https://www.theatlantic.com/family/2026/01/ice-minnesota-neighbor/685827/?gift=RRUwO0MqDZ04E409VHbUwaDcMjoRExG0_HMMRnng2k&utm_source=copy-link&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share

<https://www.meditationsinanemergency.com/this-cold-winter-love-is-a-superpower/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Niemöller

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_They_Came