

“Holy Light in an Age of Glare”  
Isaiah 6:1-13

In the movie *Shadowlands*, the Christian writer and theologian C.S. Lewis is confronted with the death of his beloved wife, Joy. Joy's metastasized bone cancer was very advanced and he knew that this was the end for her. As he speaks to one of his friends about his struggle with his wife's imminent death, he comes to the following realization, "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time- waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God- it changes me." In the depth of his pain, C.S. Lewis who gave many lectures on God and wrote many books on God, finally realized that all of life is about drawing us closer to God's loving presence.

This deep connection is the force of purpose and transformation in our lives. Yet, often times we live life as if God is on the sidelines of our existence and that our experience of faith is there only as a source of comfort or personal morality. What we miss out on is that this God we come to worship on Sundays is the creator of the universe, the energy that is in every living creature and the very breath of our life. We are bombarded day after day with bad news, with personal crisis, with the glitter of success, fame and personal possessions, all of which promise to either destroy or fulfill us as if life is about winning or losing. There is either too much light or too much darkness in our lives that in both cases we are blinded. Too much light blinds us because we are always chasing an illusion of glitter that never fulfills us. Success as presented in our culture with a focus on status, power, security and control often leads us to chasing a never-ending illusion: If I only had more money, if I only had more power, or if I only can get more recognition. Disasters, personal pain or loss can also lead us to feel hopeless that none of what we do can make any difference, and think that all of life is just nothing but a cycle of terrible events and people. So is there such a thing as finding true balance in life, a true light that can guide instead of blind us? Can we find holy light in this age of glare, a light to show us the true meaning of life?

The story of the call of the Prophet Isaiah is about finding this holy light in an age of glare. The call of Isaiah came around the year 742 BCE. This was a significant year for the people of Israel. This was the year of the death of a king who ruled for 41 years and had a successful rule where his kingdom of Judah was secure and prosperous. Yet, with the death of this powerful king, the threat of Assyria was becoming more imminent. The people were afraid and Isaiah himself was in the temple mourning the death of the king. While in worship, in the holy of holies, which was the part of the temple where only a few people were allowed and only during certain times of the year, Isaiah has a mystical experience, a vision, an encounter with God and some of the angelic beings. In the midst of the darkness surrounding his whole country, Isaiah experiences the light of God. The Seraphs who are mentioned in this vision are beings of fire, that is what the word Seraph literally means, "burn." Isaiah comes face to face with this amazing light of God. So, what happens to Isaiah as a result of this vision? Well, his whole world is turned upside down. Instead of focusing on mourning the death of the king, Isaiah is called to take a difficult message to his people, a message of warning. He is to go to his people and confront their practices of injustice towards the poor, their lack of commitment to love God and neighbor. And the amazing thing is that Isaiah agrees to carry this difficult message to his people. His response was: Here am I, send me! Who in their right mind would choose to do that? Who would choose to carry such a difficult message to his people? All of us would be happy to deliver good news to people, but who likes delivering difficult news? Who likes to call people to repentance? Isaiah not only delivers this message to the people but he also spends most of his ministry dealing with the national crisis in Judah where the people had made greed their goal in life instead of God and service.

What is amazing to me is that Isaiah's experience is very typical of those who experience firsthand God's presence. Often times, mystical experiences, or true experiences of God's presence in our lives turn our world upside down. In her book *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality*, the national correspondent for National Public Radio Barbara Hagerty interviewed many people who have had an experience of the holy and this is what she discovered: A dramatic change in one's priorities and perspective. Even though at the end of the book Hagerty does not prove or disprove the existence of God, she finds out that a mystical experience does change one's life. She reports the findings of a scientist who studied thousands of cases and who said, "Essentially the things that were at the top of the hierarchy [before the experience] went to the bottom," he said. "Often what was literally number one was number fifty, and vice versa... Before the experience, men ranked their top personal values as: wealth, adventure, achievement, pleasure, and being respected (in that order). After the experience, their top values were: spirituality, personal peace, family, God's will, and honesty. The women seemed to have fewer self-centered values than the men to start with, but even these shifted: from family, independence, career, fitting in, and attractiveness (before the mystical experience), to growth, self-esteem, spirituality, happiness, and generosity (afterward)." The message that we get from loving God transforms our standards for justice, love and all of life. We are never the same after we open the door for God to transform us. Our experience of the holy is very essential for us to see life in a new way. We need those times of worship, of being in the presence of God in order to see with clarity. The holy light of God is the key to our ability to see beyond the glare of our times, our egos, and our cultures.

In his book, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton writes, "My monastery...is a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion." To disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion is the fire of our faith. It is what kindles our hearts to move in compassion and to see life for what it is. If we are touched by the light and fire of God, we would certainly be changed to see life from a perspective of love and justice. With the holy light of God, we would respond to the difficult challenges of our times with God's grace. Imagine in your hearts how you would respond to the recent decision of the Supreme Court to give corporations unlimited power to influence politics with the light of God guiding you. How would we see that light of compassion in the glare of our government allowing corporations the status of a person in our nation? How would we face the darkness of the devastation in Haiti in the aftermath of their earthquake?

But this kind of light can only enter our lives when we put ourselves in those places and experiences that open the door for God's grace and light and shut the door on the glare of our culture. During the upcoming season of Lent, we have a variety of experiences that will help us create space in our lives to receive God's light. I invite you to pray about those opportunities and see which one is for you. Yet, I want to especially highlight to you today the book group that will be meeting monthly starting next Saturday. The book we will be working with is called *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron. In this book Cameron invites all to open their lives to the creative energy of God by letting go of the learned behaviors that block our ability to receive inspiration. She suggests two practices. One is a form of meditation through journaling every day three pages of a stream of consciousness kind of journaling, three pages every morning. The second practice is called the artist's date. This is the practice of allowing yourself two hours a week by yourself to do something that nurtures your soul, whether it is taking a walk in nature, working on a puzzle, or cooking. Both of these practices are ways to help us open up to God allowing enough room in our lives outside of the bounds of judgment, responsibility, expectations and norms. They are an invitation to crack the door open for God's light to come in.

This kind of work is so important for our lives personally but also for our world. The words of the Prophet Isaiah inspired people thousands of years ago and they continue to inspire us today to seek God's transforming presence. The time we spend in worship, prayer and nurturing our souls is the fire that can fuel all of our commitments with energy that does not seek power, control or security, but seeks love, affirmation and grace.

The story is told about an old pastor who had been forced to retire because years of preaching had caused his voice to crack. Although a humble man, he was invited to a high-society luncheon by a friend. The person heading up the luncheon requested a famous actor who was present to recite something for the guests. Agreeing to do so, he asked if anyone had a specific request. The old pastor thought for a moment and said, "How about the Twenty-third Psalm?" The actor replied, "That's an unusual request, but I happen to know it. I'll do it on one condition, though: you recite it after me." The old pastor hadn't bargained for that, but for the sake of the Lord, he agreed. The actor stood up and recited the Twenty-third Psalm with the great intonation of his lyrical voice. When he finished, everyone applauded. The old pastor then stood up and went through the psalm in his humble way with a crackling voice. When he was done, there was not a dry eye in the room. Sensing the emotion of the moment, the actor stood up and said, "You clapped for me, but you wept for him. The difference is obvious: I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd." May you know the power of God's holy light so that you may see with clarity even in this age of glare. Amen.