

“Light Rises”
February 8, 2026
Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

I mentioned last week during the announcements that February 1st was the Celtic day of Imbolc. It’s the day that falls midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. Like all the Celtic holidays, Imbolc is considered a “thin place,” a time when the veil between the material and spiritual worlds is especially thin. It’s a time for reflection and examination. Another way to think of it is to call it a “liminal” time, a boundary, in this case between darkness and light. It’s this time of year that light rises in our part of the world. Daylight is increasing and darkness is waning.

So, maybe this is a good time to hear words like these from Isaiah and Matthew. Darkness comes in many forms in the world. For biblical people the physical presence of darkness was a constant challenge. Darkness meant danger and chaos, literally. But it also signaled a descent into conflict and division and hostility. Isaiah saw his people descending into darkness as they struggled to re-establish themselves as a society after their return from exile. Their attempts to appease God through worship or piety were feckless. They were clinging to the belief that if they could just project the façade of devotion, then their behavior toward each other, their day-to-day transactions wouldn’t need to change.

“Look! You serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look! You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” There’s no more visceral practice of piety than fasting. When we deprive ourselves of food, as an act of devotion, it’s supposed to indicate we are truly serious. But for these people it was just an act. In a week or so the Muslim month of Ramadan begins. During that month, Muslims fast every day from sunrise to sunset. There are a lot of interpretations of what that means, but for many it’s intended as an act of solidarity with the poor and hungry in the world. So, they fast in order to identify with people in poverty. The Israelites are accused of fasting as a way of elevating themselves over their workers. There is no light in what they’re doing, just a further descent into darkness.

Because of their misuse of piety and worship, Isaiah’s people are doomed to remain estranged from God. It seems hopeless. How can they possibly redeem themselves? Well, their redemption lies within their own hands. Loose the bonds of injustice; let the oppressed go free; share your bread with the hungry; bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, cover them; and stop hiding yourself from your family in need. They’re not being asked to move mountains. They’re not being told they’re beyond hope. They’re told to do some pretty simple things. Just look after people in need around you. Feed people who are hungry and house people who are homeless. Pope Francis once said, “You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That’s how prayer works.”

The really amazing thing is, none of it is beyond their ability to do. And the result isn’t merely personal improvement, which is how we tend to think about spiritual growth. The result is a transformation of society. “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.”

I think we often get hung up on believing that our troubles, the challenges our society faces, should just be left in God’s hands to solve. Our job is to just keep praying and going to church, keep going through the motions of piety and stay out of trouble. But over and over we find in scripture the call to take destiny into our own hands. We’re called to act in ways that actually enable healing. Isaiah tells his people to stop passively ignoring the suffering around them in the belief that their prayers are all God wants of them. They’re told they can do what’s needed to change the condition of their neighbors in need. And when they do that they’ll reverse the collapse their society is suffering.

Jesus’ sermon to his disciples in Matthew says much the same thing. “You are the salt of the earth,” he tells them. “You are the light of the world.” In John’s gospel we find a different message. There Jesus refers to himself as the light of the world. Here in Matthew’s gospel, though, he’s talking to his disciples and their descendants. You are the light of the world. In other words, if the world is to see God’s presence at work, God’s kingdom revealed, it’s up to us to show it.

God will not be revealed in the world without us. I go back all the time to a quote from Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa who once said, “Without God we cannot. Without us God will not.” Just as with the ancient Israelites around Isaiah, God offers us a path for transforming society, for what Jewish tradition calls “tikkun olam,” repairing the world. That path is through acts of justice and compassion. It requires empathy and genuine affection for people who are different from ourselves and in need of help.

And notice, nowhere in Isaiah’s words or in Jesus’ sermon are we called to convert everyone around us and force conformity on them. Isaiah doesn’t tell his people they should only help members of their own tribe or nation. He says, “loose the bonds of injustice; undo the thongs of the yoke; let the oppressed go free and break every yoke.” This is a call to dismantle the divisions of society that keep people trapped in hopeless circumstances, regardless where they’re from or who they are. At that time in Israel’s history there was an effort underway from their leadership to purify their society and eliminate all foreign influences and elements. Isaiah pushes against that trend and offers a more expansive vision of what it means to live as God’s people. That vision is inclusive and accepting, not repressive or exclusionary.

It’s worth mentioning, by the way, that there were certainly other voices in that society arguing in favor of a more exclusive community. Those voices haven’t survived because that vision is unsustainable. A society that sees outsiders only as enemies and threats can’t last for very long. They inevitably collapse on themselves, even though it may take several generations. Isaiah understood this. He also understood that the God they served cannot be reserved for them alone. God will not be contained.

Like a light on a lampstand, God’s presence is meant to shine for all to see. Jesus tells his followers they carry within them a light meant to bring hope to everyone around them. When light rises, darkness is driven away and hope overcomes despair. Our call is to bring the world

hope. Not just some Pollyanna optimism, but real hope in the form of tangible change in how we interact with and regard one another. We see light rising in places like Minneapolis where churches and synagogues and mosques are organizing people to help feed their immigrant neighbors because they're too frightened to leave their homes to grocery shop. We see light rising in our own community when we band together to reject the ideology of white supremacy and Christian nationalism and advocate for a multiracial, multiethnic democracy. We see light rising in the world where nations join to support and defend Ukraine against Russia's violent aggression or where people speak up for the population of Gaza against Israel's continuing retribution.

Light rises in the world through us, through our willingness to risk the retaliation of the powers of this world so the plight of vulnerable people will be heard and their condition relieved. That's how our light shines before all, even when there are so many who want to extinguish it. There are some in this world who cannot stand the light and will do whatever they can to douse it. But if we remain committed to allowing our light to rise, nothing the world can do will cover it. As John's gospel says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." We are made to live in the light and to be light for the world. Let that light rise in you and darkness, within and around us, will be driven away.

Amen