

*Holy God, teach us to root ourselves
in faith, that we may grow toward
Your marvelous light.^{1 Pet 2:9}
May the words of my mouth and the
meditations of our hearts be always
acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our
Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*



From my desk at home, I can see the deep-green leaves of an amaryllis plant in the window. This sturdy plant, three and a half feet tall, has bloomed many times, putting forth spectacular pink flowers. Right now, it has no blossoms. But those tall green leaves still stretch toward the sun, pressing against the glass with what looks for all the world like joy.

The *science* of that joy, of course, is photosynthesis. Plants use sunlight and carbon dioxide to manufacture glucose as food. Then they can expand their roots, grow and put forth leaves, bear seeds and fruit. Genesis 2 affirms that God has given every green plant to us and to all living creatures for food. And that is all we need. With sunlight, plants nurture virtually the entire web of life on this planet! Even in the deepest places of the ocean, where light cannot reach, abyssal creatures rely on

organic particles that drift down from the sunlit surface. Light sustains life! Special note for Simon and others with chemistry expertise: I do know there are creatures in and around thermal vents in the ocean that use not light but microbial chemosynthesis for food. Very cool for them! But hydrothermal vent creatures are a topic for another day. On this frigid morning, I want to focus on sunlight. And I'll say this: even behind glass, even in the dead of winter, the green leaves of the amaryllis teach us to reach for what gives life.

This morning, the Gospel of Matthew exhorts us to be salt and light.

We are to season and preserve what nourishes the life of our communities.

Further, we are to perform works of compassion ^{Matt 25:31-46} that illumine the ways of God, so others will know to give glory to the Holy One who is the source of light and life.

To do that, we need to grow in faith.

We need to reach for what is lifegiving.

But how? How do we, as followers of Jesus in God's ecology of grace,

grow toward the One who is Resurrection and Life?

How do we reach for the Light of Christ?

Well, Matthew teaches us plenty about that, using traditions from the visionary prophet Isaiah. Matthew draws on Isaiah all the time. Matthew is the one who amplifies Isaiah 7:14, "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son... Emmanuel, which

means ‘God with us.’”^{Matt 1:23} It’s Matthew who says of Jesus in the words of Isaiah 9, “the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light ... and for those [dwelling in] the shadow of death, light has dawned.”^{Matt 4:15–16}

Trust that the Messiah brings light! Now, those ancient promises were first and always for Israel and Judah: for Jews, then and now the cherished covenant people whose gifts and calling from God are irrevocable.^{Rom 11:28–29} For disciples of Jesus, for us grafted late into the flowering and fruiting vine of God’s people,^{Psalm 80; Romans}
¹¹ Matthew teaches us how to hear Isaiah’s promise of light in a new way.

Matthew teaches us to hear Isaiah’s melody, “The LORD will arise upon you”—like a sun!—so “nations shall come to your light, and rulers to the brightness of your dawn,”^{Isa 60:2–3} and recognize it in a new setting in the story of the Magi.^{Matt 2:1–12} Three sages from the east follow a Star to Bethlehem so they can give precious gifts to Jesus. They honor the newborn Messiah, this brand new source of radiance, as God’s purposes continue to shine through the cosmos!

And Matthew teaches us to hear Isaiah’s melody, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you,”^{Isa 60:1} in a new musical setting in Matthew 5. Those who know blessing and fruitfulness are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness! This includes Gentiles—us. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew has scored the melody for *more voice parts* in Christ. Matthew’s cherished people, the Jews, are still singing

gorgeous polyphony from the Torah and the Prophets: love of God and love of neighbor in countless melodies lifting up faith, justice, mercy, and righteousness from Genesis on into the Prophets. With Amos, we learn to dismantle the platitudes and distorted thinking of elites. With Micah, we learn to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. With Jeremiah, we learn the holiness of lament. With Ezekiel, we learn to recognize that in times of woe and times of joy, no matter what, God is the LORD. So many lyrical melodies and beautiful chord progressions and soaring descants, wonderful dissonances and harmonic resolutions!

And now, Matthew says, in Christ, **we get to sing too!**

Because Christ has come not to abolish the Torah or the Prophets, not to suppress those melodies, but to fulfill them: to amplify that sacred music with beautiful harmonies and generative dissonances, so we can understand the music more deeply as we sing to the LORD a new song! ^{Pss 33:3; 40:4; 96:1, 98:1, 149:1; Isa 42:10; Rev 5:9; 14:3}

Matthew is not alone in hearing the music of the Hebrew Scriptures afresh. The Gospel of Luke has Mary, the mother of Jesus, sing her Magnificat as a remix of Hannah's song ^{1 Samuel 2}—a melody from the time of King David, centuries before Jesus was born. The apostle Paul sings melodies from the Hebrew Scriptures—Paul's letters are saturated with allusions to Genesis, Isaiah, and more. In Second Corinthians, Paul sings, "It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ!" ^{2 Cor 4:6} Now, I hear Paul singing as a tenor—we'll find

out in heaven if that's his voice part. In Romans, I hear Paul not singing a different tune but just shifting the melody into a tenor *fauxbourdon*. [Ask Dr. Matt Cramer what the fancy musical term *fauxbourdon* means—I'd love to see a line of people at Coffee Hour asking Matt about that. Or look at hymn #378 in our hymnal, "All people that on earth do dwell," where the melody is in the tenor.] That's what I think Paul is doing theologically with Isaiah's melody: singing it in a different and very beautiful mode.

Matthew says it as clearly as he can: God is with us in the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

And in Christ, **light has dawned**—

for those who are vulnerable and those who are persecuted,
for every suffering community and broken family,
for every tortured soul desperate for grace!

So what does that mean for our daily living?

In real talk, what does that mean?

Here again, the natural world can be instructive.

- Some plants thrive in blazing full sun—everything from cacti and prairie grasses to yellow orchid vines soak up the sun and love it.
- Other plants flourish in oblique sunlight, that soft light filtering down through the forest canopy, dappling the ground below. Dogwoods do beautifully in partial shade, as do ferns and foxglove.

- And there is a third way. As winter turns slowly toward spring, in the dark silence of the soil, living things stir and begin to germinate, because the energy of stored sunlight slowly warms the earth.

Blazing full sun,

oblique light filtering through shade,

and the intensifying warmth of energy stored in darkness:

in all these ways, light fosters growth at the very heart of organic life!

Light illumines every corner of the network in which we live and connect with one another and struggle. Light illumines every filament, cracks opens every seed, and nourishes every growing thing, from towering redwoods to thorny rosebushes to the green shoots of daffodils.

So it is with the Light of Christ.

We live in the radiant love of Christ *always*—though sometimes it feels like we're in full sun, sometimes we're in partial shade, and sometimes we're in darkness.

So:

Rejoice in times of full sun—those moments of blazing illumination that heal your heart, thrill your spirit, and strengthen your resolve to love God and neighbor!

Rejoice also in the quieter moments. Rest in the shade of work accomplished, a conflict laid to rest, an old injury healed. The light of Christ's love will filter through the canopy, dappling the ground around you with exquisite patterns of grace and peace.

And **rejoice** even in times of darkness, when the struggle is real and you can't see the way forward. Learn from the darkness of the soil. Spring will come. Sunlight will warm the ground, beckoning new life into seed, bud, and blossom!

“Your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom be like the noonday.

The LORD will guide you continually ... and you shall be like a watered garden.”

That's a *promise*—from Isaiah, and Matthew,

and the One who is the Light of this and every world ^{John 8:12; 9:5}:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

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Epiphany 5A

Isa 58:1–12; Ps 112:1–10; 1 Cor 2:1–12; Matt 5:13–20

Prepared for St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut; graciously delivered from the pulpit by Dr. Jennifer A. Herdt, Senior Warden, when illness kept me from church

Isa 58:10b–11

וְזָרַח בְּחֹשֶׁךְ אֹרֶךְ וְאַפְלָתָךְ כָּצְהָרִים:

וְהָיִיתָ כְּגֹן רִנָּה וְכַמוֹצָא מַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִכָּזְבוּ מִיָּמֶיךָ: