

LIVE IN THE LIGHT

Isaiah 58:6-12

September 7, 2025

It's 5:47 AM on a Tuesday. Sleep eludes me. Might as well get up and start the day. I lace my running shoes and step outside. You know the time of day—the sky caught between night and daybreak. It's still too dark to call it morning, but too much light to call it night. For a moment, I couldn't tell if I was watching the sun rise or set. Which direction is the light moving?

As someone who runs often in the early morning darkness, I know that disorienting experience quite well. It captures, I think, something profound about our spiritual moment. Are we watching faith's light fade, or are we witnessing its rebirth?

Twilight. It's Old English for "two lights," the collision between dissipating and emerging illumination. Two lights. Evening twilight slides steadily toward darkness. Morning twilight builds gradually toward dawn. A time of ambiguity. Same sky. Opposite directions.

The prophet Isaiah is writing to a people living in twilight time. After seventy years in Babylonian exile, they have returned to find their homeland shattered beyond recognition. Their temple lies in rubble, their traditions have been obliterated, and their identity as God's people is now far from certain.

And so, they do what religious people do when the world collapses. They revive their rituals. They fast. They pray. They worship. And yet, God feels more distant than ever. God's voice more absent. In that twilight, Isaiah the Prophet delivers a word that cuts like a blade:

***Day after day they seek me.
They delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness,
as if they did not forsake the ordinances of their God...***

***Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.***

Stop there. ***As if*** they were a nation that practiced righteousness. The prophet does not call his people wicked. He's calling them actors. They are performing piety while the script of their lives tells another story. They fast while neighbors go hungry. They pray but ignore the poor. They worship while the vulnerable suffer in silence. Religious theater that abandons the commands that make their faith real.

Here is the uncomfortable truth. We live in our own spiritual twilight. It's the dissonance between ritual and reality that plagues the Christian movement. Sharing Bible verses while ignoring scripture's persistent call to justice and compassion. Speaking eloquently of our personal faith journey while remaining silent about the way our faith is being misused and abused. Carefully curating a pristine spiritual image while unmoved by the suffering we see each day. Like our ancestors, we have perfected the art of religious performance while those created in God's image are in pain.

And Isaiah will not let us off easy. That's not in the prophet's job description. No, he traces twilight to its dimmest destination: the depth of night when faith is drained of meaning and God ceases to listen.

You cannot fast as you do now and expect your voice to be heard.

This is spiritual midnight. When prayers bounce off the ceiling because they were never intended to change our lives. When worship echoes in emptiness because it does not reach heaven because it costs us nothing. When religious expression is just another disguise for political tribe. Faith asks nothing of us.

The prophet charts a different course. There is another way. It is the way of costly discipleship.

There are some moments that shape a pastor's heart, and some of you have heard this one before. Twenty years ago, I slipped into the last pew of Duke Chapel to hear Bishop Peter Storey speak to the graduating class of Duke Divinity School. Bishop Storey was a leader in the faith-based struggle against Apartheid in South Africa and chaplain to Nelson Mandela on Robben Island. Peter Storey knows about costly discipleship. I, on the other hand, was a twenty-two-year-old contemplating my life's path. That day, I grabbed a pencil from the pew rack and wrote his words, now inscribed on my heart. Bishop Storey said:

Until you lead your congregation to engage with the real world, your pastoring will be mere pampering—your proclamation will be a religious form of talking to yourself. You must resist with all your might the temptation to play “church” while the world bleeds.

The phrase still haunts me. A temptation for every generation of believers. Religious ritual absent worldly impact. My friends, listen. Attending church weekly, quoting scripture online, parading your faith in public, means nothing if at the same time you applaud the harassment of the homeless, or celebrate policies that leave children without meals and neighbors without shelter, or justify cruelty toward those who need compassion the most. Worship that neglects the hungry, the poor, the stranger, the outcast the exile, the captive—any who are bent under heavy yokes—is not worship at all. It is spiritual midnight.

And yet. As soon as we name that darkness, we also acknowledge what every soul who has walked through long nights discovers: that midnight is not the end. In fact, the deepest darkness often signals dawn stirring just beyond the horizon. And when it comes, when it finally comes, it does not announce itself in gentle whisper. Dawn breaks.

Is not this the fast that I choose? To loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share bread with the hungry, to bring the poor into your house?

Listen to Isaiah's verbs. Feel their force against the status quo. Loose. Let go. Share. Bring. These aren't

suggestions for charitable contributions. These are acts of prophetic power—the kinds of verbs that break chains, and shatter yokes, and tear down barriers between comfortable and crushed.

You might know that Isaiah's language here echoes the stories of binding and captivity in Hebrew scripture, the stories of Isaiah's ancestors. The yokes that bent their backs, the cords that tied down their lives, the chains that restricted their freedom in slavery and exile. And now God calls the exiled to become the liberators—the chain-breakers, the yoke-shatterers.

Next comes the promise that should terrify as much as it delights:

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.

Your light. Not the flicker of a dying candle. Not the glow of a nightlight tucked safely in the corner. Your light will break forth like dawn itself—that unstoppable, inevitable blinding in its exposure of everything we've tried to keep hidden in the darkness.

But here's what we need to understand about the dawn: it doesn't just illuminate. It also reveals. Dawn exposes everything—the corruption of faith weaponized for power, the wounds we ignore in our neighbors, and the truth we've hidden from ourselves. Dawn people see clearly and respond faithfully.

And so, Isaiah's promise expands:

Your ancient ruins will be rebuilt; you will raise up foundations for coming generations; you will be repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in.

Do you hear what God is calling us to become? Not those who maintain religious routine while suffering spirals, but dawn-people who repair what is broken. The work is everywhere: economic structures that trap families in poverty, political rhetoric that demonizes the vulnerable, religious leaders who posture purely for power.

What if churches stopped playing it safe in the twilight and became what the world desperately needs—communities of people who fix what's broken and rebuild what has been

torn down? You see, the dawn Isaiah describes is not a miracle that we beg God to perform. It's the power made possible when we stop performing religion, when our prayers shape practice, our worship becomes work, and our fasting frees us to fight for those on the margin.

I'll tell you what dawn-breaking faith looks like right here in our community. A couple of weeks ago, I witnessed the ribbon-cutting for the Mosaic Center. This is a career training and coaching hub for people building careers in healthcare, often those who have very few skills, training, or education at the beginning of their journey with Mosaic. Mosaic provides hope for those who need support and serves as a powerful partner in Second's work in our city. Shadreck Kamwendo, Mosaic's Director for Workforce Development and an elder in this congregation, embodies what happens when worship fuels work, when faith moves from praise to practice. Shadreck's commitment to the common good flows directly from the strength he finds here in this sanctuary.

Isaiah's closing promise is breathtaking in its beauty and its gravity.

***Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am.***

Here I am. The words are familiar. The reply of Moses to the burning bush. *Here I am.* The answer that led Isaiah himself to a prophetic career. *Here I am. Send me.* The response of young Samuel to the voice of God calling his name in the middle of the night. *Here I am.* Mary's reception of God's greatest gift. *Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word.*

Here I am is the language of call and response. But here, God responds to our cry for help. It is the light of dawn. It is the light of resurrection. The light that exposes and transforms everything it touches. When God declares: Here I am.

So. Here we are. 5:47 AM, caught between competing lights. Two lights. A decision to make. A direction to choose. Are we witnessing faith's final slide into irrelevant obsolescence, or are we standing in those unsettling moments just before the light breaks?

I'll tell you what I believe. I believe dawn is breaking.

You can feel it when injustice makes your heart race. You can sense it when inequality provokes holy anger. You can witness it in congregations mobilized for action. You can recognize it when someone else's suffering becomes unbearable to your soul. That's what it means to be human. When someone else's suffering becomes unbearable to you.

Dawn is breaking. What will it reveal? Will we play church? Will we settle for religious performance? Or will we let God's light shine? Will we walk in the way of Jesus? Will we let our Christian conviction (and *nothing* less) be the light that guides us, so that Sunday worship becomes Monday action, faith moves from the sanctuary to the street, and our prayers become our practice?

Friends, the dawn is breaking. God is waiting. The world is watching. Stop playing church. Let's live in the light. Amen.