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Watching the sun rise in the morning can be an inspiring moment as one watches the dawning of light, the first hint of light as it appears. I enjoy watching the sun poke its light between the leaves hanging on the branches of trees in my yard, seeing light reflect off one leaf at a time. It's as though the sun highlights each leaf as important, focusing in one particular place, inviting me to notice the dancing light on each colorful leaf.

I wonder if the prophet Isaiah had such experiences of watching light dance in the trees in the early mornings, for when he wrote to God's people in exile in Babylon, he used the imagery of light: "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly."

The prophet wrote words offering hope, for the people had been in exile in the land of Babylon for many decades. The prophet may have been aware that a new government power was on the horizon, hoping that a change could bring relief for the exiles. Soon the Babylonian empire would be conquered by the Persians, who would let the exiles

return back home, repair their temple, and worship freely again.

Isaiah offered a glimmer of hope, suggesting to the people that as they cry out for help, "justice shall go before you, and God will bring up the rear to guard you and will grant you safe passage."

In addition to the imagery of the dawning light, Isaiah also painted a word picture of those in parched, dry deserts who would become like a watered garden. Several weeks ago my yard looked like a parched desert, for after weeks without any rain, the grass had turned brown. After the recent rains, the grass turned green again, as though the desert turned into a watered garden.

It's amazing that grass knows how to conserve its energy and water during a drought by turning brown. The grass isn't dead, just dormant, waiting for the rain to return. In a similar way, Isaiah knew that the faith of God's people had not yet died. Their faith may have felt dormant, like brown grass, but the prophet envisioned a time when water would bring back the vibrancy of faith and life.

But there's a catch to this wonderful vision, and in order to see it, we need to explore the verse right before the passage we heard read this morning. Our passage began, "*Then* your light shall break forth like the dawn." Did you wonder what the word *then* refers to? The word is connected to the verse preceding it. Look it up: Isaiah 58:7... What does Isaiah suggest is connected to the dawning of light?

- share your bread with the hungry
- bring the homeless poor into your house
- when you see the naked, cover them
- not hide yourself from your own kin.

There's that word again that we encountered last week: *kin*, as in the kin-dom of God. Isaiah suggested that the way we care for others is the way God cares for us. Our kin includes more than just our biological family, for it extends to the kin of God, sometimes referred to as the kingdom of God.

Centuries later, Jesus used this imagery as he told a parable about a king welcoming those who had given him food, something to drink, clothing,

and had visited him in prison and when he was sick. When the people replied that they didn't recall doing any of those things to him, the king replied, "When you did it for one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it for me."

In other words, Jesus suggested that as we care for those in need, we end up serving him as well, which seems to echo Isaiah's words to God's people hundreds of years before Jesus.

Throughout the Bible, God seems to have a theme going on—offering hospitality, caring for those in need, seeking justice for those who are poor or unable to care for themselves.

I'm not sure why today this message has become a partisan football, tossed about by our nation's political parties. Take any topic—immigration, welfare, poverty—and we find ways to argue about the seemingly extreme policies.

Isaiah and Jesus seemed pretty clear—the way we treat others is the way we serve God. What's to argue about that?

In a recent book entitled *Poverty, By America*, sociologist Matthew Desmond begins by telling his story of growing up and becoming aware of poverty while his father served as pastor of First Christian Church in Arizona. He wrote,

After my father lost his job, the bank took our home...and we learned to do without that, too. Mostly I blamed Dad. But a part of me also wondered why this was our country's answer when a family fell on hard times.¹

While attending college, he began meeting and listening to those who were homeless. He noticed that some people around him had lots of money to buy fancy cars and the college had spent millions of dollars to build an artificial lake on campus, while a few blocks away others were begging in the streets. He writes in his book, "How could there be, I wondered, such bald scarcity amid such waste and opulence?"²

These questions prompted for him a life-long journey of meeting with those who experience poverty in our nation. In his book he writes:

This is who we are: the richest country on earth, with more poverty than any other advanced democracy. If America's poor founded a country, that country would have a bigger population than Australia or Venezuela. Almost one in nine Americans—including one in eight children—live in poverty. There are more than 38 million people living in the United States who cannot afford basic necessities, and more than 108 million getting by on \$55,000 a year or less, many stuck in that space between poverty and security.³

He also notes that while we debate government benefits for the poor, we often forget the benefits given to those with wealth. In an interview he explained:

So if you add up the amount that the government is dedicating to tax breaks, mortgage interest deduction, wealth transfer tax breaks, tax breaks we get on our retirement accounts, our health insurance, our college savings accounts, you learn that we are doing so much more to subsidize affluence than to alleviate poverty. Most government aid goes to families that need it the least.

If you add up all the aid...you learn that the families in the top 20% of the income

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distribution in America receive, on average, about \$35,000 a year from the government. But families in the bottom 20% of the income distribution only receive \$25,000 from the government.⁴

While we debate the politics of how to distribute money in our nation, the politics of Jesus and the politics of Isaiah would say, “Do you see someone hungry? Feed them. Someone ill, heal them. And

then your parched life will become like a watered garden and in the dawning of light you will see the kin-dom of God.

¹ Desmond, Matthew. *Poverty, by America* (p. 4). Crown. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid., p. 5.

³ Ibid. p. 6.

⁴ “Private opulence, public squalor: How the U.S. helps the rich and hurts the poor,” March 21, 2023, www.npr.org/transcripts/1164275807