

In the book *The Quaker Message*, Hugh Doncaster wrote in 1972, “A very far-reaching part of the Quaker message is the affirmation that if God is revealed to every human person, then there can be no parts of life which are “secular” in contrast to other parts which are “sacred”...The underlying faith is that at all times our behavior should reflect the conviction that God is at work in those with whom we mix, and in ourselves; that every human encounter can fan or quench the divine spark in another; and that our lives are at all times lived in the presence of God.”

First hymn is green #53, “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus”

Our first reading is from the great poet, W.H. Auden, who wrote in memory of Yeats:

“Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.”

A Second Reading comes from Psalm 56:9-13. “By this I will know that God is for me. In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise—in God I trust; I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me? I am under vows to you, O God; I will present my thank offerings to you. For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.”

Our third and last reading is from Caroline Fox who wrote in her journal in 1841 at the age of 21 of ‘the struggle through which a spark of true faith was lighted in my soul’: “The first gleam of light, ‘the first cold light of morning’ which gave promise of day with its noontide glories, dawned on me one day at meeting, when I had been meditating on my state in great depression. I seemed to hear the words articulated in my spirit, ‘Live up to the light thou hast, and more will be granted thee.’ Then I believed that God speaks to us by God’s Spirit. I strove to lead a more Christian life, in unison with what I knew to be right, and looked for brighter days, not forgetting the blessings that are granted to prayer.”

Our second hymn is Green #40 “Dark of Winter”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—May the light of life illumine our days with warmth in the quiet comfort of dark and the softened silence of snow. We pray in this season of advent for our new beginning, for an ever coming to birth of revelation in our hearts, for a beauty and a wonder that strengthens our hope, that builds our connection, that defines our religious society of friends. In our days of joys and sorrows, give us the reservoir of spirit that fills with every blessing and encourages every new day, the rounding and defining of every new season, every new year. Amen.

Handout Hymn “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry”

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other.

Message: Dear friends—Caroline Fox was a diarist from Cornwall of no relation to George Fox, but from a prominent family. She knew Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill as close friends and was a universalist in her Quaker beliefs in her maturity, recognizing the sacred in a wide range of religious expression, calling herself a catholic Quaker—using the word catholic as the adjective of all-embracing, world-wide. She felt that John Stuart Mill became cold as he aged, with writings and philosophy that was much too cerebral and devoid of heart and feeling—a hazard known in my own academic profession. At any rate, her most famous quote speaks of how if one invests in the Light that one perceives, however slight a glimmer, it grows. That, as several of our readings mention, it is possible to fan a spark into a flame. She wrote of the spiritual message she received in meeting that was clear in its wording, “Live up to the Light thou hast, and more will be granted thee”.

Our practice, in meeting is to sit in that Light, to learn to know it or find it, or at least expect it, and the more we do so, the more we will be able to find it. But it is not really in the finding that she situates the growth of Light—it is in living up to it. We do not seek the inner Light just to know it or to make contact with it, we seek it like a beacon, to serve as a guide, to illuminate our ways, to be the way. If we live up to it, more comes, it is mutually reinforcing. It is our hope and comfort—that song, that voice, in the quiet darkness of winter. The Light is not an academic or experimental perception, or even an experiential phenomenon to be described, but rather a compelling force. As the psalmist wrote or sang, it is the light of life. Holding someone in the Light is therefore not just a place to sit, but a sending of a real life force, not a hope for someone, but a giving of hope to them.

This revelation of Caroline Fox came to her at a time of great depression. W.H. Auden, too, was known as a melancholy man, and yet his love for the common of all humankind is so profound.

His great Christmas poem, “For the Time Being” has the beautiful line of faith, a prayer to Mary and Joseph, “Blessed women, Excellent Man, redeem for the dull, the average way—that common, ungifted natures may believe that their normal vision can walk to perfection”. That sentiment is echoed in today’s reading from Auden:

“Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.”

Which makes the whole purpose of poetry, the work of the poet, to bring a blessing, to find the light in words, to open the door to praise and wonder. Auden saw his vocation as bringing light. We do the same in music, in art, in loving conversation, in friendship, in connection, in appreciating and drinking in God’s good earth. Just as Caroline Fox lives up to the light, in the same way, the psalmist simply wants to be close to God, to feel the sacred. Like Auden, the writer of the psalm sees that there is a melancholy stumbling towards death aspect of human life, but we also can look and feel beyond that in love, be in this together, in Light, and as Friends, not some prescribed and formulaic or defined light.

Each of us has light—what Caroline Fox calls “the Light that thou hast”—in different forms. We know that—many of us share with each other how we see this time and faith we share from very different angles and perspectives. For some of us it is the beauty of Cayuga Lake in the winter light, for others it is a walk in the quiet forest, or the experience of love with children, with family, with friends, or in an inspiring message of hope from a public figure or in a world situation or cause that is close to us. For yet others, that light has been experienced by a direct sense of message or divine inspiration, as Caroline Fox herself had. It might also be in the messages of reading or ritual that are directly identified with religion and the Religious Society of Friends, or insight gained from intentional prayer or ministry. Millions see God in the prophetic lives and witness of Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Gaia, and their personal or chosen forebears or cultural traditions. Live up to the Light that thou hast, and more will be granted thee. Stay with your starting point, with the Light you do have and feel and live into it—it is yours. When you are grounded in what is yours, when that seed is planted and takes root in you and in your way, in your convinced heart that no one else prescribes or knows as well, it can grow to be part of the garden, it can open to the flowers around. The Light that thou hast, the seed, may yet produce your blossom, again, all that is your experience and makes sense to you, but in the garden, on this earth here together, we all can drink in together the rain, and the glorious sun.

Our closing hymn is Green #241 “Lady of the Season’s Laughter”

Closing: In this beautiful season of winter, I leave you with the warming words of 2nd Timothy 1:6-7: “I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.”