

Arise, shine,” says the prophet Isaiah in our first lesson. “Your light has come.” The problem, is that many of us can’t see it. And it’s not like we don’t take our eyesight seriously.

After all, millions of people around the world agree to let an ophthalmologist take a small knife, called a microkeratome (micro-carratone), and cut the flap of the cornea - so that a laser can be used to change the shape of the cornea - so that they won’t need to wear contacts or eyeglasses anymore. It’s called LASIK surgery and it’s a procedure that has helped countless people to see better.

Yet, one of the absolute wonders of our world is that it is full of light, even on dark and gloomy January days — but only a tiny sliver of all that radiance is visible to us. Our human eyes are designed to detect only visible light, which is a tiny slice of the electromagnetic spectrum - it’s the part made up of light with relatively short wavelengths. All other forms of light are completely invisible to us.

Take infrared light for example. We cannot see it, but in this case our blindness is really a blessing. Since any heat-emitting object glows with infrared light, we would be constantly distracted by those wavelengths if we could see them. Or how about long, stretched-out radio waves, another part of the electromagnetic spectrum? In order to detect that kind of light, we’d have to have huge eyes, like satellite dishes. And who really wants to have huge dish eyes anyways?

The Bottom line: Our human eyes do pretty well for us. An author by the name of Joel Achenbach writes in National Geographic, “that the particular position of our eyes, protected by the skull and located close to the brain, is evidence that visual data is important to our well-being. About one-fifth of our brain has the job of doing nothing but processing information from the visual world around us.” But processing the light that Isaiah calls “the glory of the LORD” is quite another matter. And although it is a wavelength that doesn’t

require dish eyes big enough to capture radio waves, it does require us to have eyes of faith.

In the book of Exodus, we observe that the glory of the Lord is “like a devouring fire,” it’s a powerful radiance that changes the face of anyone who looks upon it. You may recall that the face of Moses began to shine when he talked with God directly, so much so that he had to put on a veil to keep from frightening the people of Israel. It is that same powerful light that later appeared when Jesus was born, and the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds in a field outside Bethlehem, terrifying them. In the Gospel of Luke, the prophet Simeon said that the baby Jesus was “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Glory appeared again in the transfiguration of Jesus, and in the resurrection.

Looking back, the apostle Paul rejoiced that God “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” The glory of the Lord. It’s intense, overwhelming, frightening at times ... but most of all its illuminating. It helps us to see the full power and personality of the Lord God Almighty. The gospel of John says that when the Word of God became flesh and lived among us, it was then that we saw “the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

Grace and truth. That’s what becomes so clear in the light of the glory of God. Ok, so if that is the case, why don’t we perceive it? It’s a good question for us to ask at the beginning of 2023. What will we see this year? What won’t we see? What are we visioning as we step into a new year of opportunities and challenges?

Perhaps we need a whole new way of seeing — an eye transplant, so to speak. The eyes of cynicism are not working for us. We have a hard time believing that people can live authentic lives of compassion and selflessness. It colors the way we choose to live our own lives. It affects our belief in a loving and caring

Providence. And it leaves us bitter and feeling that the world has given us the short end of the stick, or that life has unfairly passed us by.

You might even say that the eyes of rationalism aren't much better. We think that there's nothing real except the visible world. Unless we can see it, touch it, taste it, hear it, smell it - it's not there. It's hard for us to believe that there's an unseen God, who cares about us. We want a God who is manageable, understandable, visible — a God who shows himself at least every once in a while. What we've got instead, we complain, is a bunch of promises made by a divine deity, which anthiests and unchurched people might consider to be for the gullible and naïve. And if we are honest with ourselves, sometimes we have doubts, sometimes we can relate to Doubting Thomas and want to see and touch Jesus.

Thankfully though, not everyone “sees” it that way. One light in the history of faith, a monk by the name of Anselm of Canterbury put it this way: “I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this I believe - that unless I believe, I should not understand.” John Chrysostom an Archbishop of Constantinople once said that, “a comprehensible God is no god at all.” So, apparently, we need eyes of faith. And if a transplant isn't needed, perhaps we simply need a new prescription. We need a lens that will enable us to see what we've never seen before.

It may be the lens of Scripture, from which we've been away far too long. It's a new year. It's time for us to get back into the Word. Perhaps it will help us see better. It may be the lens of the church: We need the encouragement and support of a community of faith. It's a new year. Time to get back to church. Perhaps in grace and love we can help each other see better. It may be the lens of worship: We need to feed our souls so that the eyes of our faith will remain healthy. It's a new year. Time to get back to worship. We'll see better and most likely we will also feel better.

It may be the lens of service: We need to get outside of ourselves to minister to others. Removing the focus from ourselves and onto others, will make the eyes of our faith much stronger. It's time to get back to service. We'll see better. It may be the lens of love: We need to apply compassion and charity to those around us. Love is the ointment that heals the eyes of our faith. Indeed, love, as Paul implies in 1 Corinthians 13, opens the eyes of faith and hope. It's a new year. Time to get back to love. After all, with love in our hearts we are bound to see better.

Faith eyes can pick up divine light in times of deep darkness, and this was as true in the first century as it is today. There wasn't much brightness in Judea in the time of King Herod, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. In fact, we see just how dark things were in the world at that time when Herod ordered the massacre of infants in a desperate attempt to kill baby Jesus.

But through the blackness, there were some who kept their focus on the light. Wise men from the East came looking for Jesus, and after working their way around Herod they found the baby in a house with Mary his mother. They offered him wonderful gifts, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that they "shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD." These men were the kings that the prophet said would come to the brightness of his dawn.

There is no doubt that the wise men had eyes of faith. They could see a faint flicker of light in the middle of the darkness, a light that signaled the presence of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Our challenge is for us to focus on this light as well, and to trust that Christ is always present — even in times of chaos. After all, there is always some light to be found, especially if you have the eyes of faith. In fact, none of the shadows we encounter in day-to-day life are totally dark and depressing — they all contain some small amount of light.

Shadow expert David Lynch, co-author of a book called *Color and Light in Nature*, points out that a shadow is filled with light reflected from the sky —

otherwise it would be completely black. If you want to see a completely black shadow, one that has no brightness at all, you have to go to the moon. Black is the way that shadows on the moon looked to the Apollo astronauts, because the moon has no atmosphere to bounce light into the dark corners of the lunar surface.

It just goes to show that even in our shadow times — our times of disappointment, failure, temptation and tension — God is going to bounce some light into our darkness. And the good news for us is that faith eyes are not given to us at birth — they are developed over a lifetime of looking.....

If we are willing to search for the light of God in times of deep darkness, we will find it. If we look hard for Jesus Christ in situations of chaos and confusion, we will discover him. If we train our eyes on the small glimmers of light that appear in our shadow times, we will emerge from the blackness that threatens to overwhelm us.

Although darkness shall cover the earth, promises Isaiah, “the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you, and thankfully we won’t need dish eyes, or invasive laser surgery for us to see it, just the eyes of faith. And Thanks be to God for that! Amen.