



January 22, 2017

Paul Phillips

An Elementary School Teacher had 26 students in her class. She presented each child in her classroom the first half of a well-known saying and asked it to come up with the remainder. These responses are from six-year-olds, in the first grade.

**The teacher said,** “Never underestimate the power of ...

and a student responded, “TERMITES!”

**The teacher said,** “Don’t bite the hand that ...

and a student responded, “LOOKS DIRTY!”

**The teacher said,** “Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, cry and

a student responded, “YOU HAVE TO BLOW YOUR NOSE!”

The teacher said, “Better late than ...

a student responded, “PREGNANT!”

**Isaiah the prophet said,** “There will be no more gloom for those who

**have been in distress.....**

**and we, the people responded.....”Increase our joy!”**

I find this a curious text for us today. On Christmas Eve, we also read this as part of a larger passage from this same chapter. The people of Israel having walked in darkness now see a great light. They are released from an oppressor; the armaments of war are destroyed; and the birth of a special child is announced.

We tend to focus on the child promised which we read in the longer version; the light has dawned on them in the birth of the Christ child and they rejoiced. We rejoiced on Christmas too, but let us look at these four verses, and see what it is God wants us to hear today.

When reading only these four verses we focus on the dramatic contrast between light and darkness, and on the joyful celebration and God's intervention to release the people from the yoke of oppression. The release from oppression may not seem right for us, but I believe it is and it certainly is for our **Mission partners**, who we remember today. When we cannot do, that which we feel is the right thing to do for our neighbors and the life of this church, **are we not oppressed too?**

In the Bible, light refers to God's presence. God came to earth in the human frailty of a child to save us. Light can also mean the guidance of the divine as in "I've seen the light." Light can mean the dawn, the break of day, **something new** has taken place.

When the community is in need, God ultimately delivers **a gift of newness**. What could be more **new** than a baby born humbly into this world? God delivers us

from distress; it is a sign of what God intends for the future of his people. We anticipate a **newness** that will overcome the reality of the past.

Light is a source of illumination. It provides a new place of understanding. The light of Christ teaches us about God. We become more spiritually aware because of God's light. Light symbolizes life and joy! The celebration we read in these verses appear as a spontaneous expression of joy, as if it were the thanksgiving festival at the end of a good harvest or the expression of joy when the battles are over and a war has ended and a time of peace begun.

**The prophet Isaiah said, "There will be no more gloom for those who have been in distress.....and we, the people responded....."Increase our joy!"**

What Isaiah seems to be saying is this, "Do not give up. Do not be afraid. God's light will break through the gloom." We have witnessed this in our church. God has walked alongside us and carried us through a time of suffering.

We can be joyful again because oppression, exploitation, humiliation are given over to the salvation we find in Jesus Christ. We want our mission partners to be joyful too. We want to end the oppression, exploitation, and humiliation of those they serve.

After our Presidential inauguration, the greatest fear I hear and read about in America are those historical groups in this country who know oppression, exploitation and humiliation and they do not want to go back to those days.

They want to be rescued further. Rescue is about a powerful light; one so powerful it can destroy the enemy, disarm the combatants. Light brings clarity and understanding and circumstances can change once they are brought into the light. We would cheer for the enemy to be disarmed. We would stand up and celebrate if there was an end to terrorism, if there was an end to exploitation of women and children, if there was an end to poverty, hunger and homelessness.

**We would shout out to God, “Increase our joy!”**

And why not? In the longer passage we read about a “Wonderful Counselor”, a “Mighty God”, an “Everlasting Father” and a “Prince of Peace.” In our passage today we read about **light and darkness**. Perhaps we can remember a former time, a time in our lives without God, a time when we were vulnerable and exposed, trying to find our way in the darkness. Now we are brought into a **new time**, a time of light that is both dramatic and powerful that changes circumstances and provides new possibilities for us and for our neighbors.

This **new time** is where we embrace God in all our faithfulness, with all our goodness and even the not-so-good-things about us. This is the future; a future with a God who dispels the darkness and **brings back hope**. In Israel’s time of this scripture they had no realistic possibility of **newness**, the enemy had invaded and occupied their country.

But now, God intervenes for them, as God intervenes for you and me, and as God intervenes for our mission partners, for all who are under the yoke of oppression. People who are left behind under the weight of poverty, lack of education, anxiety and greed, are provided a light that can transform their world. That is the light of Christ! When that happens for you and me and for those we love and those we serve, we can't help but shout for joy.

No matter what political party is in power, no matter who our leaders are, there will always be a need for voices like Isaiah's that proclaim a vision of a world at peace. There will always be a need for prophetic voices to say clearly what is unacceptable; the rod of oppression, the exploitation of the poor, the rule of fear. There will always be a need for prophetic voices to stand outside of the halls of power and lift up a vision of what our world, and we, can become, to call us to a new way of living.

Isaiah reminds us of the importance of imagination in our pastoral work, the capacity to see beyond things as they are and to imagine things as they might be. He reminds us not to lower our sights, not to get comfortable with the status quo, not to be satisfied with anything less than the release of those held captive, the end of war making, and the lifting of the burden of oppression from all peoples everywhere.

These verses are not just about historical events in Israel, but how God works in world events in all generations. God brought a savior to lighten the dark places of the earth and bring salvation to this world. It is a light for us as much as for anyone else who wants newness in their life. Gloom and doom do not have the last word. God wants to turn the humiliation of the vulnerable into a celebration and exultation of joy. Can we believe that? With a faith rooted in God, yes, we can believe that. In the face of world terrorism we can believe in a God who will break their rod of oppression.

This is liberation at its core. This is what Christ brings into the world. We, Christians, are liberated from sin so that we can respond to the good news of grace in obedience to God. And we are liberated from racial, social, and gender divisions of society. When Christ lives in us, we are free from these divisions; we are free to carry out the work of the Lord. Let us continue the work of Jesus Christ. Amen.