

"The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD."

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I never really like hearing the alarm go off. Yet it always seems a bit more jarring this time of year when the alarm goes off far too early and the first thing I hear from my clock radio is Andy Williams singing, "It's the most wonderful time of the year". Now, I've been with you long enough that most people know I'm a Christmas junkie. I'm also an Advent junkie, because the two really go together. These days of Advent are a wonderful time to gear up and get ready to greet the Saviour who comes for us, and to prepare for a truly Christ-filled Christmas. This is the time when I play my Christmas music, and I have enough to take me all the way through the Advent and Christmas seasons. (Actually, I probably have enough to take me through Lent!) The tree can be up and lit, and I won't feel guilty about having the outdoor lights on (which I actually did have on earlier last week). When I do these things, I am doing them in anticipation, for I know what is coming. In less than a month we will celebrate the wonderful gift that God has given to our world. We will rejoice that Jesus, our Saviour is born. We will praise God, for the eternal Son has become one with us in human flesh and blood, to redeem us and make us one with Him forever. In these Advent days we do look forward in hope and joy, for we prepare to meet Him who is coming again to bring us to the peace and rest of His eternal home.

Yes, I'm a Christmas junkie, but when someone is singing how wonderful things are at 6:40 in the morning, and I'm thinking of all the things I have to do on that day, it doesn't seem so wonderful. If anything it seems almost annoying. Wait until the sun is up. Wait until I've had my morning coffee. Wait until I finish some of those things I have to do. Maybe then you can tell me how wonderful this time of the year is.

I think we all feel a bit of this. These are busy days, and many people experience their highest stress levels at this time of year. Part of that stress comes from working as hard as we can to make this the most wonderful time, while failing to see the very one who is at the heart of all we do. We also know that it doesn't take much to change our wonder into worry, or our celebrating into sorrow. Even as we see the lights that adorn houses and trees and streets, we can feel a growing sense of darkness.

In the darkness, the uncertainty and the worry of our world, the words of the prophet Isaiah bring a wonderful message of comfort and hope. We hear God's promise of peace and security, for God assures Isaiah: ***nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*** There is the promise of justice and protection through God's righteousness. When God is at work for His people, we truly do experience the most wonderful time of the year, and the most wonderful reality for our lives.

Today we live a bit betwixt and between, for we are caught in the reality of life in this dark world, even as we look forward in joy and hope to all that is ours through God's grace in Jesus Christ. There is no better advice for us in these days than what Isaiah says in our text: ***O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.*** Even though we are lost in the darkness of this world, we see past the darkness, and into the greater light and life we have through Jesus Christ.

It's hard to find your way in the dark. We don't always see the pitfalls and the dangers that can be around us. One of the things we know about this time of year is that it is darker earlier, and the mornings also seem so dark. If we did not have lights in our homes, what would this mean? When we come downstairs first thing in the morning in our house, it is so dark that the stairs seem treacherous. We have to turn on a light just to feel safe.

Isaiah says the same thing to us. We need the light of the Lord for all we do in our lives. We need that light, for we are living

in some very dark days. Go ahead, pick a problem—any problem. Think of any ill or concern we have as a society. Think of the things that are frightening or scary in our world. Why do they happen? An unbelieving world doesn't get this, but the truth is, these things happen because we are walking in the dark, without the light of God shining for us. We like to think that we are an enlightened society. We like to think that we are a tolerant, progressive and inclusive society. So many boast that we have been able to throw off the shackles of the past and the shackles of religion. Yes, they think of themselves as enlightened, but they are really lost in the dark.

Isaiah knew this was happening in his day. People paid lip-service to God, but really lived without God. The standards of right and wrong became fuzzier all the time. Those things that God has commanded—well, they just weren't all that important in the minds of many people. Isn't that exactly what we see happening today, too? Our world is trying to do anything and everything to remove God from our lives and from our thinking. Walt Whitman said, "whatever satisfies the soul is truth". As I read that, it says that you can't find truth or right or wrong except in yourself. God's Word? Well, some would say it is useful, as long as it works for you. But the idea of absolute truth or of the holiness of God alone, that just doesn't fly today. We can all be or do whatever we want, as long as we don't hurt anyone else.

This is the darkness that is growing all around us. And what happens in the darkness? There is hurt in our world. There is greed and selfishness. Wars are still being waged. People steal and kill and hate. There is a growing sense of lostness in the hearts and lives of people. In our Epistle lesson, Paul speaks of *the works of darkness*. (Romans 13:12, ESV). He says we are to "*walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.*" (Romans 13:13, ESV) The problem is that we aren't led by God's light. In fact, Scripture says: "*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.*" (John 3:19-20, ESV)

Thankfully, Isaiah speaks to us today, with hope for this dark world. He tells us that the day is coming when people will say: "*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*" God calls out to our lost and dying world. He sends the Light into the world. One of the songs I like to sing with the children in Sunday School says, "Are you lost in the dark? Do you need a little spark? Do you need a little light to help you see? Out of the darkness, Jesus' love is shining, down in the hearts of you and me. He is the light that's shining bright! He's the truth that sets the captives free. He is the light that gives us sight, and reveals the Father's love to you and me".

Out of the darkness of a cross on Good Friday, Jesus' love shines with forgiveness and life, as He suffers and dies to pay the price for all our sins on that cross. His light bursts forth from the empty tomb, revealing the life we have in Him forever. Now we walk in His light. In His light, our lives are different. Isaiah says that when people learn from God and are led by God then *they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.* When are led in the light of His Word, then we see disputes and disagreements ending, because people have learned to forgive and the care for one another. When we *walk in the light of the LORD* we see God's commands for what they are: not chains to bind us, but as gifts to guide us; not as rules to condemn us, but as the way we show love for God and for one another.

Many people look to the Christmas season as a season of light. There are the lights on the trees, the lights on our homes, the lights in public displays. I like to go see the ZooLights, and I heard that there are over 800,000 lights on display. The BMO Centre boast that it has millions of lights on display for its Holiday Wonder. There is a display at Spruce Meadows and the Lions Festival of Lights has always been enjoyable. I enjoy the lights. I like to walk around or drive around to see all those Christmas lights. But there is a greater light that shines for us. John says: "*The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.*" (John 1:9, ESV) Best of all is that "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" (John 1:5, ESV)

As God shines that light to lead us out of darkness, He also He establishes His mountain—His church—to bring that light to the world. He is at work in His Word. He is at work through you and me, through His church, to help others see the light. I know it seems that this task is getting harder and harder all the time. After all, people still love the darkness more than the light. But God is with us. His Spirit empowers us to be the light the world needs. He has given us something so wonderful to share, and that is His truth in Christ. As we walk in the light of His Word; as we live that Word, His light will be reflected to others. By the power of His Spirit, there will be those who see the light. And that light, which changes our hearts, will change our world, casting out the darkness, as the peace, joy, and love of Christ shines for all to see. Amen.