

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 18, 2011

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 64, 75:1-2, 71, 80, 65:6.

Lessons: Isaiah 8:20-9:7, 1 Corinthians 15:45-58, Matthew 4:12-17.

Sermon Text: Isaiah 9:2-5.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Think of how you enjoy the light. Joy comes with the dawning of the light. But the light would not shine on the people of Isaiah's day. The light Isaiah is talking about would come far in the future. Before the light would shine, Israel and Judah would experience the judgment of God for their unbelief and rebellion. Assyria would devour and assimilate Israel. Babylon would carry Judah away captive as a prize of war.

God's people would be devastated, but a remnant would remain and return to the land God promised. In comparison to the nation during Isaiah's day, the remnant would be small, but God's plan would enlarge the nation. When the light finally dawned, God's people would come to include not only those of Jewish heritage and culture but believers from all nations. For example, the apostle Paul's work among the Gentiles enlarged the nation – the spiritual nation of Israel – the holy Christian Church, believers. But that was not the end. The expansion of God's people has continued through the centuries to include races of people Isaiah could never have known except through the miracle of inspiration, including us. But at this time in history, God's people were in darkness, spiritual darkness, and didn't have much hope. But there were believers even then who could confidently say: *"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning."* Psalms 130:5-6 Today let's look at

GOD'S PROMISE OF LIGHT, JOY AND FREEDOM

- 1. God made this promise at a time of great spiritual darkness.**
- 2. God sets us free from the bondage of our sins and we rejoice in that news!**
- 3. This promise was fulfilled through the coming and work of Jesus, the Son of God.**

Our Old Testament lesson gives us the background of our sermon text. At that time every thing looked black and there was *"no light of dawn."* The people who were physically Jews could *"see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom."*

Paul speaks of believers as *"persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed"* 2 Corinthians 4:9 and *"sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."* 2 Corinthians 6:10 As bad as things looked for God's chosen physical nation in Isaiah's time, especially those called by the Holy Ghost to believe, there was hope and confidence. Isaiah speaks of what was promised.

Three things are promised here, and they all point to the grace of the gospel. Believers among God's chosen people, the tribes of Israel and Judah, could comfort themselves with these hopes of the Savior's coming, his first coming to earth, just as we now are to comfort ourselves in all times of trouble with the assurance of Christ's second coming. The promises given by Isaiah are first: *"a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned"*. Second, God promises to increase the number of faithful believers, and third, we read of God that he has *"shattered the yoke that burdens them."*

The first promise says ***"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."*** Isaiah speaks of this great future promise as if it has already happened: It is a glorious light, especially upon the ***"land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,"*** which Isaiah says God had especially humiliated in the past. This part of the nation of Israel was an area which was especially prone to attack by the enemies of God's people, because of its location North and West of the Sea of Galilee, all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, and the fact that it was more or less the northern portion of the nation of Israel, and somewhat less hilly than other parts of the nation.

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." This was to have its fulfillment when our Lord Jesus began to appear as a prophet, and to preach the gospel in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, and in Galilee of the Gentiles. All those who lack the gospel walk in darkness and they dwell in the land of the shadow of death, in thick darkness, and in the utmost danger.

When the gospel comes to any place, to any soul, light comes, a great light, a shining light, which will shine more and more. To us today, who can have brilliant light any time simply by flipping a switch, this may not seem important. But in Isaiah's day, when sunlight was the only light except flickering candles or oil lamps, bright sunlight was especially welcome. God's light of salvation should be as welcome to us, as light is to those who sit in darkness, and we should gladly welcome the gospel, for it is the real light, the only light which can remove men from the darkness of sin eternally.

God's faithful people among his physical people, the Jews, had been on the decline. We humans never know how many or how few believe, but God's revelation through his prophets, including Isaiah, tells us how few really still believed in and followed the true God. God has ***"enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder."*** Remember that the prophet is speaking as if all these prophecies have already been fulfilled, as if the Savior has already come. The Jewish nation suffered one judgment after another because of their unbelief, their falling away, and not following the true God. We see such falling away continuing in our day, even among Gentiles who have had the gospel preached to them for decades or centuries. God is the one who ***"makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations, and disperses them."*** Job 12:23

God is the only one who can really provide real joy. For any really lasting happiness or joy only comes from God. The hymn writer is correct when he sings ***"All else, though it first give pleasure, Is a yoke that presses hard. Beneath it the heart is still fretting and striving, No true, lasting happiness ever deriving."*** The Lutheran Hymnal, 366:1.

Isaiah used two comparisons for the joy of God's people regarding the growing number of converts, that is, believers in the true God. The first was the joy at the harvest; the second was the joy at the end of battle when the enemy has been thoroughly defeated. In both cases, a long and difficult effort had come to an end. The harvest was over and the people gathered. It was time for celebration. Although the workers sweated to bring in the harvest, they have done nothing to cause the crop to grow and mature. That is something that only God can do. Men only wait with patience for the precious fruits of the earth. The second picture is the victory after a battle or a war. When the battle was over, the enemy defeated, it was time to divide the plunder. This too was time for celebration. In this comparison Isaiah remembers the day the nation of Midian was defeated. With 300 men, Gideon defeated a huge army of Midianites and their allies. We read in Judges 7:12: ***"The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore."*** God had sifted the Israelite army from 32,000 to 300 so that the victory could clearly be one that God gave to his people. It was a gift of his grace, not the result of their own strength and strategy.

The third promise is of a glorious freedom. ***"You have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor."*** God's people have good reason to rejoice. They shall no longer be in slavery, slavery to sin, death, and the power of the Devil. Because of the new man within each of the believers, they have a choice: to serve God or to serve Satan.

Even as the Lord, at the time of Gideon, had delivered Israel from the oppression of the Midianites in a miraculous manner, so He worked a deliverance from everlasting bondage, from spiritual slavery, as the Messiah overcame all the enemies of mankind and now divides the spoil among the believers everywhere.

The spiritual slavery with which the people were burdened, ***“the bar across their shoulders,”*** is a reference to the beating stick, the cudgel of the overseer in striking the back of the slave.

The victory would be thorough. The joy it produced would be great. God would shatter the oppressor's power. However this is not a military victory achieved with armies and weapons of war. The peace implied is not the end of warfare on the face of the earth. Even if human beings destroyed all the weapons of war, we would still not remove the cause of strife and discord among people – the sinful human heart. This graphic picture of victory is a symbolic description of the spiritual victory God would give his people through the Messiah, the child that Isaiah will describe in the very next verses” ***“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”*** Isaiah 9:6-7

Sin, death, and Satan oppress all of mankind, but the Lord will graciously shatter their power and defeat them completely. The root cause of strife would be eliminated. Such a victory is impossible with any and all human effort. This victory is purely the gift of a gracious God.

“Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.” After the victory of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, over Satan, sin, and death, there is no need to clean up the warrior's clothing and boots for the next battle, for there will be no more battles.

We can rejoice at this victory of Jesus Christ. It is summed up in the words of Psalm 51, and you will recognize these words: ***“Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.”*** Psalm 51:9-13

So we too, can be joyful and share that joy. How are we preparing for the celebration of the coming of Jesus in just a few days? Is our preparation tied to the things of this world and the spending of money for earthly gifts or is our preparation centered in what Jesus Christ did for us and for our children? What does it mean to you that your sins are forgiven, that your Savior is coming in the message of Christmas?

Lord, make our hearts and lives joyful, knowing that you are coming into our hearts again today through your Word. Come every day, and come to deliver us to eternal life in heaven. Amen.