

It's good to have light in the darkness. And it's good to be reminded of the Advent promises in the middle of June . Because this is not just a 'let's get ready for Christmas' text.

When we hear Isaiah in late November or early December, we are eager to talk about the light that is to come - the light of Christ - to reveal God's goodness - to chase away the dark and gloom from our days and our lives. We long for the endless peace of this promised kingdom. We look forward to the 'zeal of the Lord of hosts...'

For deliverance - as we learn in the Christmas and Easter stories - is a God-thing. Deliverance - redemption - renewal - salvation...we long for them when we're at our theological best - but we also recognize that God is the one who makes all this happen. And If we're being honest, we're still waiting for that joy to be multiplied - for the war-clothes to be destroyed - for the grip of grief and sin to be broken. We're. Still. Waiting.

At Christmas it seems so close. Gentle, familiar hymns. Families gathered - gifts exchanged. At Christmas, people seem...better. There's something about the season that is gloriously contagious. And when we're at our theological best, we can imagine that it's the zeal of the Lord of Hosts that spreads that Christmas joy. But it's not Christmas for long. And while we try and 'keep the faith,' by the time summer comes, the promise of Christmas and Easter seem a distant memory.

It's not that we have no faith. And it's not that we aren't doing our best to follow the trail that Jesus blazed. But the stories of 'God with us' - the stories of Christ, Risen - these are the stories that carry the promises at their most vibrant. 'Hail the heaven-born prince of peace,' we sing. 'Hail the day that sees him rise.' We are joyful. We are hopeful. But that energy is hard to sustain through ten months of what the church calendar calls 'ordinary time.'

And so, Isaiah today offers a refresher. A chance to be reminded that this is not just a pre-Christmas text; that these are not seasonal promises. The zeal of the Lord of hosts shall not be bound by a calendar.

The burdens that Isaiah speaks of may have been historically specific. But we accept that these holy words have meaning beyond their time - meaning for us. Even now, there are burdens waiting to be lifted. Anxiety and fear over the state of things in Ukraine. Tensions rising between China and ...well, everyone. Continuous wars of attrition and absorption in and among countries too isolated (or too politically insignificant) to make it to the headlines.

There is conflict everywhere we look these days - so much that many of us have stopped looking. We hide our eyes and we keep our heads down and pray for it to be over...or better...or even different. And for some, that is the most faithful way to approach times of trouble. And to be honest, those prayers are always welcome.

But Isaiah's bold words make another claim on us. They can remind us of the constancy of conflict - they can stand as an example that, where humans are concerned, some things never change. But they refer to God's promised deliverance in the present tense. The activity of God - mercy and deliverance; justice and peace - play out in real time. “A child has been born for us; a son given to us...” The verbs suggest action underway - a fait accompli. There is motion and energy in these promises from so long ago. Motion and energy derived from an eternal and unstoppable force. ‘From this time onwards and forevermore,’ says the prophet. An unstoppable force. The zeal of the Lord of hosts.

So, yes - keeping your head down and engaging in fervent prayers for peace is an option. Please don't stop praying. But the prophet calls us to lift up our heads. To look and see. For the light IS shining. The darkness is being overcome. The child has been given, and indeed, has conquered the darkness of death for us. There is much that we must endure, but there is nothing left to fear.

God's promise is unfolding. In the midst of what we call chaos, God works to reveal order. From the depth of all dark times, God's healing light still dawns. Christ's life, death and resurrection are significant markers in this ongoing project of redemption and relief - all part of God's promise.

Lift up your heads. Look toward the light. There is good in the world, and God is at work. The promise has not been abandoned. The prophet speaks to us. And when the project seems too big to consider, or too far away to remember, never fear - The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this - can do this - is doing this.