

## Isaiah 65:17-27

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb?

1. We aren't really sure – we'll form a committee and get back to you!
2. First someone wants to find out if the light bulb really wants to change.
3. There's the traditional non-answer answer to a slightly tweaked question: How many Episcopalians does it take to screw in a light bulb – I'm not sure Episcopalians use the word "screw."
4. Twelve – one to do the work and eleven to serve on the committee.
5. At least 3 -- One to call the electrician, One to mix the drinks, One to quit the Church in protest...
6. Ten – one to change the bulb and 9 to say how much they liked the old one!
7. None—we don't change! Change the light bulb?

We all know, of course, that different faith traditions get their own list of answers depending on how their perceived by the rest of the world, but especially by themselves. One really has to know the Episcopal Church to be able to write the answers or to understand and and the rest of us need to know the Episcopal Church to laugh at the answers. Perhaps we could even use this question to form a final quiz for our Episcopalian course: If you can give at least five answers to this question then you really know the Episcopal Church!

God's monologue in this morning's reading gives the Hebrews a chance to change their entire lives – not just the candles that provide them with light. The part of chapter 65 that we do not hear provides the first part of the conversation that tells God's unhappiness, causing the answer we hear from God this morning. Hear a little from the first half of the chapter:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am', to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices;

See, it is written before me: I will not keep silent, but I will repay; says the LORD; because they offered incense on the mountains and reviled me on the hills, a people who provoke me to my face continually,

...because, when I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not listen; instead you did what was evil in my sight, and chose what I did not delight in. Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD: My servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry; my servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty; my servants shall rejoice, but you shall be put to shame; my servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart, and shall wail for anguish of spirit.

Then whoever invokes a blessing in the land shall bless by the God of faithfulness, and whoever takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of faithfulness; because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my sight.

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For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered. Be glad and rejoice in what I am creating – I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight!

Sounds like God is pretty happy here. God is about to create new heavens and a new earth and we're only in Isaiah! We haven't even gotten to the Revelation to John! God hears the cries of the people. God knows how they have visited their unhappiness on others. God knows they have made their own beds. God knows that even as God's hands are held out to provide the people with a way forward, they decline the offer. They prefer to depend on their own resources and the way they've always done things. Eventually they don't even call out to God. And so God's response almost sounds like the beatitudes of Jesus. This makes sense in the teachings of Jesus, after all, because Isaiah was a prophet in his scriptural tradition.

But God says, for those who do take the offering of my hand, I will provide wonderful, new things for you – a new earth a new heaven! Why would you not want to take advantage of that? Welcome to a new life! A life where people will build their houses and tend to their own gardens; where they will live long, happy lives; where they will have everything they need; their children will not be raised for war or conflict. In fact, God says, when they call to me, I'll already be answering because I will already know their question. And a wonderful thing shall happen – those creatures who once were enemies and bullies and victims shall now lie together in peace. Except for the serpent of course – he really screwed up to the point where he's not going to get a second chance although he will still be there to tempt them. But there will be no more destruction; there will be joy and I will delight in my people.

Wow. Change your ways. Turn toward me and take my hand. I'll lead you into a wonderful new future. Talk with me and I'll hear you. Let's do this world together and then you'll see some incredible things happen and you will live into an amazing life!

I'd say that's not a bad offer. I can live my life the way it's been or I can follow God into a new way of being. A new way of being with God, a new way of being with one another, a new way of being community together, and a new way of reaching out beyond our safety and comfort to a new safety and comfort. Whether I live for another day or another year or for for many years, how exciting this could be!

I want to say something about our curate Matthew. When he first applied for the position, I looked at his profile and papers and thought, Oh my God, this guy is going to be too much of a challenge. He's 26 years old and he's excited about going out into the community and sharing the Good News. Can we deal with that? He sees things differently that I do – than most of this parish does. I'm not sure I want to deal with non-traditional ministries, with new ways of inviting people, with the names of theologians I don't know (for me, especially new theologians), and with having to explain all this new stuff to people who seem to be comfortable where they are.

It was tempting to take our other candidate for many of the opposite reasons.

But there was just something about Matthew that said, "This is a good challenge for you and for the parish. He will instill new life. He's a good balance with the rector. He has the potential to be a solid colleague. And frankly I like the way he thinks – if I were right out of seminary, even at 40 years old, I'd be right there with him!

So I hired him – surprising a number in this congregation, surprising the bishop, surprising some of my fellow clergy. Liz hired a 26-year-old right out of college and he has spikey hair? Are you sure it's Liz Zivanov at St Clement's? All I can say is thank God he didn't have the new post going through his ear on his interview visit!

Matthew was a new earth for us, if you will. As we all are, he is of God. This doesn't mean he is God or even God-like. But he has taken the hand that God has reached out to him. Now Matthew is still a human being and a new and young member of the clergy. But I will tell you that he challenges me – almost always in a good ways – in ways that cause me to consider why I might balk or feel uncomfortable with what he says or proposes. But I have to do that processing sometimes before I respond to him. And sometimes we go forward and sometimes I'll ask to him to consider a different path to his objective and sometimes I'll say, I need you to slow down. But we are together in bringing our faith community into a new place – a new earth as God says.

We have to continue to move in new and exciting ways – this is who we're called to be as people of God. We cannot look back and hold on to what was. God said, the former troubles are forgotten, the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

This new earth will be a place of peace and prosperity for all people, not just a few. We will find new opportunities to share with the poor, the lonely, the unemployed, the single mother and her children. We will see that the old ways can evolve into new ways. We will give up our little territories and agendas and self-lifting actions and return to the ways of God that reach out to those in need – ways that are more loving than we could ever imagine. And by our willingness to take God's hand and move toward this new earth, we will realize what we do is limited by our own resources, we will move out of our complacency, and will be continually surprised by the new ways in which God takes us. God has made us active, creative, loving people and wants us to live into those gifts.

But we need to take advantage of God's hand reaching out to us. It's right there in front of each of us as God says, Come on with me! I have an absolutely magnificent new life to show you! Walk with me and we'll do this together. Don't be scared – you will soon love it and be amazed at how safe and wonderful and joyful it is. But let me take you there. Choose this new way of life; don't look back. The new way will soon become a good and comforting way for you as the old and once-useful ways fade away.

Let those of us with ears hear God say to us, Let me help you change that burned out light bulb even as you learn how new light bulbs can change Episcopalians into even brighter lights themselves!

Amen.

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