

Isaiah 35:4-7a Tell those who have a fearful heart: Be strong. Do not be afraid. Look! Your God will come with vengeance. With God's own retribution, he will come and save you. ⁵Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unplugged. ⁶The crippled will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy. Waters will flow in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland. ⁷The burning sand will become a pool, and in the thirsty ground there will be springs of water.

There are some passages in the Bible that scare the living daylight out of me. One is from the book of the Prophet Amos, "**Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!**" God had called the people of Israel to himself over and over again. They ignored him and acted as if he didn't exist. Well, they were about to see with their own eyes that he is very real and that his great patience has come to an end.

In the letter to the Hebrew Christians the author warns against deliberate sin. It's one thing to fall into sin. That will be a constant danger. It's another thing entirely to not care and just do whatever you want. He writes, "**It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**" People might be able to escape justice in this life, but you can't escape God's judgment.

So when we read in this text that God is coming, our first inclination might be to flinch or say, "Oh, no." But the same God who is serious about the threats he makes in his Law is just as serious about the promises he makes in the Gospel. Things might have seemed hopeless at Isaiah's time. God assured them and all of us that his great love remains. God Is Coming to remove fear and to change everything.

Isaiah begins this text with a message from God himself, "**Tell those who have a fearful heart: Be strong. Do not be afraid.**" From the previous chapters in this book it might seem like they would have every reason to be afraid. God had given warnings of his judgment to all the nations around them. Those prophecies got closer and closer until they came against Israel itself.

Remember that there was no longer one unified Israel. The northern kingdom kept the name Israel while the southern kingdom was called Judah because most of the residents there were from that tribe. The Assyrians under the command of King Sennacherib had totally wiped out the northern kingdom. All the people were killed or deported to far away lands. Now they set their sights on Judah and captured some of the fortified cities.

Thankfully, Judah's king, Hezekiah, trusted in the LORD. In the upcoming chapters God speaks through Isaiah to show that the Assyrians would not step one foot into Jerusalem. It was good news that Hezekiah gladly accepted, but he could still look past the city walls and see an invasion force of 185,000 battle-tested soldiers just licking at their chops to destroy Jerusalem, just like they had destroyed every other city that had stood in their way.

Now unless someone has seen active combat in a war, we've never faced something like that. I remember when I was in grade school. We were well aware of the threat of a Soviet nuclear attack. The Tri-Cities were a major target because of all the manufacturing that went on here. It's not like it was constantly in the front of my mind, but it was an ever-present danger until the Soviet Union collapsed the day after Christmas when I was in my second year at the Seminary in Mequon.

There are a lot of things to be afraid of. Some of them are very real. Some are more...existential. People my age worry about whether or not they'll have enough to retire. I refuse to move in with one of my children. Concerns about inflation are everywhere. You don't even have to understand the concept. You just realize that when you go to the store, everything is more expensive.

Then there are spiritual fears too. We worry about our friends or family members who have strayed away from their Savior. We can't forget some particular sin that we committed at some point in our lives. We figure that since we can't forgive ourselves, then God must not be able to either. These things very quickly switch from being fear to being hopelessness, and that's the last feeling any Christian should ever have.

God didn't just tell the people of Judah to stop being afraid. He gave them every reason to stop being afraid, "**Look! Your God will come with vengeance. With God's own retribution, he will come and save you.**" It is not inherently a good thing to know that God is coming with vengeance and retribution. Because we are sinners we deserve God's rejection and punishment. Thankfully God shows that the point of him coming will be to save them, not destroy them.

If you look ahead to chapter 37 you see how God dealt with the Assyrians. They hadn't just insulted Israel. They insulted God himself. God was going to act for the sake of his Name and for the sake of his promises. Overnight that entire powerful army would be struck down. Sennacherib would return home with his tail between his legs. Not long afterwards, he was assassinated by two of his own sons. It just reminds us of how true Paul's words to the Galatians are, "**Do not be deceived. God is not mocked.**"

God did all of this because he had promised that through his chosen people, in that very country, the Savior of the world was going to be born. No foreign army, no matter how powerful, was going to stop him. 700 years after Isaiah's ministry was over, God kept that promise. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He is true God who took on our human nature so that he could be our greatest Champion.

Because Adam and Eve rebelled against God, Jesus lived perfectly faithfully to his heavenly Father. Because Adam and Eve brought sin and death into the world, Jesus went to the cross to take our sin on himself. His death took away the sting of death. That's because the real power behind death is Hell. Now that Hell is no longer an option for us because of Jesus, we don't have to live in fear of death anymore.

Because we know all of that is true, is there really anything in life for us to be afraid of? As I slowly approach retirement, do I suddenly have to worry that God isn't going to take care of me anymore? Can any rate of inflation outstrip God's ability to bless his people? When Jesus said, "**It is finished**" on the cross he didn't put any limits on it. The work to win forgiveness and eternal life was done and we get all the benefits.

God wanted the people in Judah to encourage each other. Yea, the Assyrian commanders would keep shooting off their mouths for a bit, but God was going to shut them up permanently. You all know someone who is afraid. Maybe that fear is very real. Maybe that fear is a product of their own imagination. It doesn't matter. The solution is the same. Point them to God's great love for them in our Savior Jesus Christ.

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The Old Testament was filled with all kinds of prophecies which gave people glimpses of what their Savior would be like and what he would do. No one did more of that than the Prophet Isaiah. In chapter 7 he foretold that Jesus would be born from a virgin. In chapter 53 he describes Jesus suffering, death, and burial so clearly that you would think that he is standing there, watching all of it happen instead of writing seven centuries in advance.

In this text in particular Isaiah lists some things that the Savior was going to do, "**⁵Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unplugged. ⁶The crippled will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy. Waters will flow in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland. ⁷The burning sand will become a pool, and in the thirsty ground there will be springs of water.**"

We have one example of these words being fulfilled in the Gospel lesson for today. Jesus healed a man who was deaf and therefore couldn't speak properly. He used some beautiful sign language to relay to the man what he was going to do. Instantly, the man could hear clearly and speak plainly. He didn't have to go to therapy for months as things slowly improved. Jesus' power as God changed everything.

When John the Baptist had been thrown into prison he began to wonder if Jesus was really the promised Savior. Jesus gave him the proof he was looking for, "**Go, tell John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.**" Jesus must be the Savior because he is doing all of the things that the prophets said he would do.

Some might say that the last verse and a half of this text were not fulfilled. Deserts didn't become fertile land flowing with water. That hasn't happened...yet. All of these physical problems and problems in creation are all the result of sin. But when Jesus comes again and makes everything new, then sin, blindness, deafness, death, and even unusable land will all be things of the past. Sin will be gone so also will be all the effects of sin.

That is the most important thing that Jesus had come here to do. If all he did for that man in the Gospel lesson is that he enabled him to hear and to speak, it really wouldn't help him if he ended up going to Hell anyway. Think about it. Up to that point, the man had not heard a syllable of God's Word. Now he was enabled to hear the Word of God from the one who is the Word made flesh.

That also explains why Mark tells us, "**Jesus gave the people strict orders to tell no one.**" Jesus had not come here to just be a great miracle worker. Pretty soon he wouldn't be able even eat or sleep because people would crowd around him, hoping to see a miracle. A few weeks ago we saw how one crowd was so fixated on the feeding of the 5,000 that they didn't want to accept him as their Savior from sin.

Today God has not seen fit to allow me to perform miracles like he allowed Peter and John to do in the second lesson for today. But he has given us medical technology that is beyond anything they could have dreamed about at Jesus' time. Have a bad heart valve? No problem. We'll get you a new one. They can replace your hip, send you home the same day, and not even give you any restrictions. Yes, human beings came up with all of this, but God is the one who gave us the wisdom to do it.

As great as all this is, there still is no man-made cure for sin. You can't go down to Walgreen's and get a vaccine for it. You can't go down to Henry Ford and have it removed like a tumor. As long as this world goes

on there will only be one solution to every human being's spiritual condition and that is the perfect life and the innocent death of our Savior Jesus. The need for him is just as great as it was at the time of Isaiah, at the time of Christ, and at the time of the early Church.

That's so comforting for us. Even if everything else seems to be going wrong in our lives, there will always be one thing that is going right and that is our relationship with God. God the Father had been planning for it from eternity. God the Son made it possible by being the Savior we need. God the Holy Spirit brought us into that relationship through Holy Baptism and keeps us in it through the Word and Holy Communion.

All of this reminds me of Paul's questions in Romans 8, "**What then will we say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also graciously give us all things along with him?**" He wasn't expecting that all of us would suddenly start answering together. He wanted us to think about it a little bit.

If God is for us—and he is—who can be against us? Ask Sennacherib how well that worked to stand against God. If God gave up his one and only Son for us—and he did—what won't he be willing to give us? That good news changes everything. It doesn't mean that the rest of this life will be easy. Sin will see to that. But it does mean that we don't go alone. Our Triune God is with us every step of the way. He will turn all the bad things in life into good for us. He will guide us and direct us until we are safely with him forever in heaven.

God Is Coming to remove fear and to change everything. It is good for us to take the threats in God's Law seriously. That will help us keep our sinful natures in line. But remember what the Apostle Peter wrote, "**The Lord is...not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance.**" We do not live in fear of the Almighty God. We live in love for the God who saves us.