

Holy Cross, Daggett and St. Mark, Wallace Lutheran Churches, Michigan

December 15, 2013

Isaiah 35:1-10

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

John was depressed. It wasn't supposed to be going this way. He had been sent to prepare the way for Jesus. He carried this mission out flawlessly. He had pointed to Jesus and called him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was sent to proclaim a message of repentance. He faithfully proclaimed this message of repentance. He proclaimed this message boldly and fearlessly. He challenged religious leaders who thought they had it all right.

He told a king who had taken his brother's wife that he was sinning. The king should not have his brother's wife and God wasn't pleased with him. John had done everything God wanted him to do. He didn't hold back. He wasn't scared to proclaim God's word. He didn't mind proclaiming God's word put him in prison. However, John was still depressed. Doubt was creeping in and he was beginning to wonder if he was even right anymore.

What caused him to feel this way? **“When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’”** John was depressed because it looked like Jesus wasn't doing the things John proclaimed he would. John had promised acts of judgment and Jesus sweeping away the wicked. What was happening? It looked like the wicked were winning. He was in prison, he felt like a failure and his faith was shaken.

Can you relate to John? Can you relate to feeling depressed and having your faith shaken? I can. I look around and I see a world filled with pain and suffering. People are mercilessly attacked by diseases like cancer or heart disease. People lose their sight or hearing or their ability to walk. People get old and lose their independence. Children rebel against parents. Parents mistreat children. Christmas is coming, but instead of being happy it makes people sad because their loved ones have died and they are alone.

These things are sad, but there is something else which shakes my faith and depresses me even more than these things. What shakes my faith and depresses me more? It is the attack Satan levels against God and his church. What does this attack look like? It looks like this: I go out of my way to encourage or invite someone I haven't seen in church in a while to come to church. I tell this person we've missed seeing them. I tell them our church suffers when they aren't there. Both of which are true.

My invitation goes out and it is accepted. The person I've invited to church comes to church. I am happy to see them here. Others are happy to see them here. It is a great day. Yet, Satan doesn't stop his attack. He works to distract the invited member with things they could be doing on Sunday morning. He lies to them that others don't like seeing them in church and tries to convince them not to go. The battle rages on and presses hard against this struggling church member.

What happens next Sunday? Busyness and laziness rob the member trump going to church. The member believes Satan's lie about others not wanting them there. Weeks or months go by and we do the same cycle all over again. Satan's victory with this person depresses me. He is working with the person's sinful flesh and robbing this person the opportunity of hearing about their need for a savior and God's plan of salvation to save them.

Satan sees what happens with this cycle. He taunts me. He tells me I have failed the person. He says I didn't do a good enough job to reach them. He urges me to give up and doubt God's promise that his

word is powerful and effective. He tries to convince me it is useless and the cycle will never end since God's word can't change hearts. People won't listen to my invitation. I should feel sorry for myself because God is losing the battle. Satan is winning.

John isn't the only one filled with doubt and whose faith was weak. My faith can become weak. I can fall into doubt and despair. I know your faith has too when trying to reach out to the lost and straying. Guess what? We are the people Isaiah has in mind in our lesson today. Isaiah has in mind people who are struggling. He is writing to people who think God's enemies are winning and they should doubt the power of God's word because God doesn't seem to be winning the battle against Satan.

What is Isaiah's message for John and for us who are filled with doubt? **"Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.'"** Isaiah comes to us with a message of power and strength. He encourages us to be strong since our savior is coming and he will deliver us from our enemies.

He will deliver his church from Satan and his attacks. He will bring justice and vengeance against those who have opposed him. He will punish those who have attacked us. What will this deliverance look like? Isaiah compares it between two deserts. Normally, deserts are harsh and barren. Our deliverance is like water poured on this desert. **"The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy."**

"The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. A highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there."

Our hearts were once barren and harsh. We had no interest in following after God. Sin and death ruled in them. Doubt and despair were our masters. Jesus has changed all of this. He has poured the message of his life giving gospel into our hearts. His Holy Spirit has used this gospel and created faith in our hearts. The Holy Spirit has used this faith to transform our hearts from a barren desert into a desert oasis filled with life.

Isaiah describes this incredible transformation. **"The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow."** Isaiah tells us our hearts are filled with the water of life. Do you know what this imagery brings to my mind? It brings to mind my baptism. My baptism is the place where my Lord took and drowned my sinful nature and replaced it with a new self. This new self is filled with life and love for God.

This new self loves to be fed with God's promises like the one Isaiah makes to us. **"And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the LORD will return."**

“They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” What do these promises do for our new self? **“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.’”**

These promises strengthen our new self. They reassure us Jesus is coming back. They show us the devil has not won. He is lying when he says God’s isn’t powerful and effective. It gives us strength to begin the circle of inviting those we haven’t seen here in a while to come back because it will remind us that Satan will not win every battle for every heart. God’s word will work. It will overcome people’s laziness. It will overcome their busyness. It will transform their hearts.

I have spoken a lot about those who invite the struggling Christian back to church. But what about those of us who are here who might have been invited to be here today because we are struggling in our faith? What if I or someone else has noticed your lack of attendance and have encouraged you to come back to church? Did it hurt you to realize the bad cycle you sometimes fall in? Did it hurt you to realize it depresses me when you come once in a while? Did it hurt to realize your church misses you?

I hope it did. I hope God’s law stabbed your conscience and convicted you of your spiritual laziness. I hope God’s law convicted you of your idolatry of busyness. However, these words weren’t my main goal of this sermon. I have failed you if this is what you think the main goal of my sermon was today. What was my main goal? **“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come.’”**

My goal was to strengthen your feeble hands and steady your knees with the promise your savior is coming for you to take you to be with him. He laid his life down for you to make it possible. This is the message we hear every week at church. This is the message I want your struggling heart to hear because this message rescues us from doubt. It rescues us from despair. It gives us eternal life. Amen.