

# Fourth Sunday of Advent 2024

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[ 0 : 01 ] Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for passages of scripture like Isaiah 35 that speak to something that we desperately long for, but just is not present in our world.

So help us to come to scripture, hearing it afresh, and Lord, putting our hope in you, for you are the one whom this scripture speaks of.

And what you have promised to do, you will surely make it happen. So Lord, we pray this morning, what we don't have that you would give us, what we don't know, you will teach us, and what we are not, you will make us become.

We pray all this in Christ's name. Amen. If you hang around me for a few days, you'll know that I really enjoy podcasts. I'm sure I'm not the only one here.

Love podcasts. I wonder, honestly, sometimes if I am a glutton for podcasts and if I'm doing myself a big disservice by listening so much that I'm just not taking in as much as maybe is available to me.

[ 1 : 11 ] Nevertheless, I love them. History podcasts. I just recently got into a true crime podcast that a friend of a friend started. One about espionage. Very wonderful stuff. Interesting thing about podcasters is that often they're entrepreneurs.

They're trying to hustle. They're trying to make a living out of it. And a part of that is getting advertisers. And more and more, I've heard an advertisement for BetterHelp.

It's this online therapy counseling organization that pairs you up with a counselor from wherever to help navigate difficulties and mental health challenges, etc., etc.

Overall, I think it's a wonderful thing that the taboo around talking about one's mental health is not really a taboo anymore.

At least it's a lot more mainstream and people can get help that they need. But I will say it seems to me that more and more there is...

[ 2 : 18 ] It seems like anxiety specifically, it is becoming more prevalent. And I don't know if it's just that it has always existed and people are just pointing the spotlight at it or people are just becoming more anxious.

It's not so much a judgment as just an observation. And anxiety, interestingly, can manifest in many ways. But I'd like to specifically focus around the anxiety that comes with the unknown, which is really an interesting and very prevalent thing in our day because there are a lot of unknowns.

There's a lot of anxieties. The past year, if anything, we've seen an anxiety around the financial future, especially around young people.

Can they afford homes? Can they rent? Afford rent? Will they make ends meet? There's an ever-growing segment of our society that has eco-anxiety.

The earth is on its way to Armageddon. So much so that... And I think it's still a smaller group, but nevertheless, if I've heard of it, I'm sure you have as well.

[ 3 : 29 ] People, young people that don't want to start families because they're afraid that the children they bring into the world will be brought into a hellscape. A lot of anxiety around that.

Social anxieties. Like I said, financial anxieties. All sorts of different issues around the unknown.

There's no assurance at its core. There's no assurance that the future will be okay. That tomorrow will be brighter than today.

So there's a lot of problems without resolutions. Be they real or perceived, there's no happy ending. And I think at its core, there's no hope.

The Bible tells a different story. It proclaims a different story. And Advent, this Advent season, is this preparation for really the climax of all of history, of the incarnation, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

[ 4 : 33 ] That is so subversive, that looks to push back against hopelessness. The Bible tells a different story. It's a story that understands the human need for resolution and hope.

It understands that having no assurance for a brighter tomorrow is a terrible, terrible reality to live in. The biblical story recognizes that at our core, we don't just need food and drink, but we need joy and gladness.

We need to be part of something that eclipses the here and now, something that gives us purpose and meaning. Something that is eternal. I think that at its core, a lot of these anxieties have to do with us feeling like we are homeless, like we do not have a place.

And yet, we all, to a certain degree, feel this, maybe some more than others. And yet, our strivings and our workings and our, all of our energies that we have going after this meaning, this purpose, seems to be elusive.

So we're going to wrap up our short Advent series in Isaiah. We've spent the last three weeks, this is the fourth in Isaiah, looking specifically at the prophecies of the coming of Jesus.

[ 6 : 05 ] This, Isaiah 35, it speaks of the visionary climax for all people who know and trust the Savior. It envisions the fulfillment and culmination of the human condition, hopes, our strivings, and speaks to a real, genuine resolution for real problems that all human beings face.

It will actually speak of, this chapter will speak of this eternal home that is available to all that would just call upon the name of the Lord. It's a beautiful passage. So we're going to turn to Isaiah 35, Matt read it for us.

If you have a Bible, or if you use one on your app, on your phone, a Bible app, turn with me to Isaiah 35, and we'll consider how our text makes three key promises.

The first is a promise of life that gives hope. The second is the promise of strength that gives endurance. And finally, the promise of goodness, that we can enjoy goodness forevermore.

So we're going to jump right into it, verses 1 and 2. Our first promise that we're going to look at is the promise of love, of life that gives hope. I'll read verses 1 and 2 again. Just a bit of a context to Isaiah 35.

[ 7 : 45 ] In the previous chapter, it's a chapter of judgment. And it's really actually a hard chapter to read. And it's hard to square it with the truth that the Bible claims and that we will always promote that God is a God of love.

It can seem incongruent. I'm not going to read it, but it uses language like, the sword of God will be sated. God will get his blood.

It's like a really intense passage. I'm not going to get into it. I talked about this a couple weeks ago. But I'll just mention that the judgment of God is a part of his love.

It's a part of him protecting those he loves and doing a just thing to evil. So that's all I'll say. I'm happy to talk about it afterwards.

But I just want to draw your attention to, within this context, we have the preceding chapter of being a judgment chapter. It's heavy. And then we get into chapter 35, and we see something completely different.

[ 8 : 58 ] If chapter 34 describes a hopeless people, a rudderless, confused people, a homeless people, this chapter speaks of a desert that is blooming.

It's this absolutely magnificent picture of an oasis in the desert. And it's a miraculous one. Chapter 35 has shades.

If you know your Bible, it will draw you back to the Exodus. If you don't know much about the Exodus or if you've forgotten, no problem. Israel's in Egyptian bondage for 400 years.

God saves them and brings them to, promises them this land of their own that was promised to Abraham. It's called the promised land. But between God rescuing Israel out of Egyptian slavery and then them entering the promised land, they have 40 years of wandering in the desert, in the wilderness.

And during that time, they were grumblers. In fact, the whole generation did not enjoy the promised land. But in one of these scenes with their grumbings, they demand of God some kind of miraculous sustenance.

[ 10 : 17 ] They are looking for water. They are looking to quench their thirst in the desert. They actually threaten to kill Moses if he doesn't make God do what they want.

It's a really horrendous blight on the history of Israel. But yet, God in his mercy caused water to shoot out from a rock. And you have to think, it's not just like a little stream.

There's hundreds of thousands of people. It would have been a sight to see. And God does it for his people because he's a merciful and loving God. And we have something similar here because what is being described is the desert blooming.

And what Isaiah, really the Lord, but what Isaiah is describing is a second kind of Exodus. If Exodus represents God rescuing his people out of slavery, specifically Egyptian slavery, causing the desert to bloom as they are on their way to the promised land, then Isaiah 35 envisions something even greater.

A second Exodus, but a greater Exodus, where God will rescue not just the Israelites, but all people out of their bondage, not to just Egypt, but to sin and to death.

[ 11 : 32 ] And that as he is leading them to Mount Zion, which we'll see in verses 8 to 10, he will give them signs of the glory that is to come.

So this kind of sets the stage of what Isaiah 35 is all about. The desert will bloom. It will bring life. It will be beautiful and strong as they return God's people to the promised land, as the redeemed return to him, as he restores a people.

But how will this come about? Isaiah tells us at the end of verse 2. So I'll read a portion of verse 1. I'll read actually verses 1 and 2 again.

So we have all that in the background and we're familiar with the text again. But this is what it says. But this is how the Lord's going to do it. It'll be the second part of verse 2. I'll draw your attention to it shortly. Verse 1.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it.

[ 12 : 34 ] The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. These are images of beauty. But here is how the Lord's going to do it. They shall see the glory of the Lord. The majesty of our God.

The unseeable God. The source of pure light and life will allow himself to be seen. Which is to say that he is bringing people into his very presence.

He is becoming their God. They are becoming his people. And a relationship is being forged by God with his people. And he is letting them in.

He is the prize of prizes to be won. And the end in both senses of our strivings will be realized. It will cause the end of our strivings.

And it will be the end of our strivings. And this is a wonderful, beautiful picture because it describes the Christian faith in a very real way.

[ 13 : 31 ] One of which is about life and hope. The Christian faith promises to give abundant life through knowing the unconquerable, unseeable, pure, just, and loving God.

And as we behold him on his terms, we behold his glory, his majesty, we find our purpose. This is Christian hope.

And if we embrace it, anxieties about the future, anxieties about death and despair will begin to subside. Knowing one's true purpose in life.

Knowing that there is a God who loves and has made a way for exiles us to return to him. It's incredibly powerful.

And it will bolster one's faith and one's mental fortitude. And what I'm not saying is that this is a promise to live a life complete without anxieties.

[ 14 : 37 ] Anxieties come. Doubt creeps in. Situations that are out of our control wreak havoc in our lives. Loss in all sorts of different ways.

Will come and they will shake us. But I'll say this. The more we entrust our future and our present to this God, the more we will be immovable.

Not that we will have greater strength or greater grit in and of ourselves, but our hope will be on someone who is unshakable. Our lives will be on a firm foundation.

But this ultimate day that Isaiah is talking about here is far off for the original hearers. The desert at the time did not bloom. We'll see later on that there's this promise of a Messiah and what he will do. It has not yet come. The original hearers of Isaiah's prophecy are just taking this at God's word.

They still lived in a desert. We also do not know such a future.

[ 15 : 49 ] Because what is spoken of in Isaiah 35, part of it has come to pass, but not in its fullness. They lived in a desert land and so do we.

So how can we continue to endure such difficulties and feelings of unease, such difficulties of life, and yet the promise is something so much greater. Something without anxieties, without fears, without pain, without doubt.

It brings us to our second promise. The promise of strength that gives endurance. Verses 3 to 7, if you could turn with me to that. Just in a second, I'll just mention something briefly.

So the promise is still far off. Which means God's people need to trust the Lord for encouragement and strength to endure.

Easier said than done. Interestingly, as a father of young kids, I'm starting to see more and more my faith with the Lord in relation to my children's relationship to me.

[17:01] And I see sometimes, I tell them, listen, just wait a little bit, you'll get whatever it is later.

Or just wait a little bit, mom and I are busy doing something. I ask them to wait, but then compel them to trust me. And then I see how they struggle with that.

Not always failing. Sometimes, very dramatically. Sometimes, very dramatically. Sometimes doing a great job in waiting. But nevertheless, they need to trust me that my word is true.

And that what I've promised will come to pass. If they would just listen to my voice. I fail in keeping promises. But nevertheless, you see the struggle here.

You see the tension. God has promised something. It has not come to pass. He is saying, trust me. And it will. So the people need to be steadfast and stable and convictional in their beliefs.

[18:02] Nevertheless, when you have to wait indefinitely, your trust can begin to wane. There's this wonderful, very memorable verse in Proverbs chapter 13.

And some of you may know it. Hope deferred makes the heart sick. But a desire fulfilled is a tree of life. But that first part, hope deferred makes the heart sick.

It is hard to continue to wait on the Lord. Especially if there's no reprieve for the difficulty of life.

Sometimes the seasons we go through. And you can look back on them.

There's seasons. But when you're in them, they feel unending. Like there is no light at the end of the tunnel. It is difficult to think that things will be better.

I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon. The hopelessness that seems to be gripping at least a lot of young people in our day. It is hard to somehow think that tomorrow or next year or next decade will be better.

[19:06] And then our trust begins to wane. How then can we live in a period where our desires are not fully fulfilled yet God has promised that they will be?

And our hope is deferred yet God says continue to hope. Notice here that this is an anxious heart that's being described. And yet the anxious heart in verses 3 and 4 is bolstered.

Not by extra effort or better strategy or more grit or more alms giving or being a better person or this inner strength mantra. But rather with beholding the Lord and waiting for his salvation.

Look with me. Verses 3 and 4. Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, be strong, fear not.

Behold, your God will come with vengeance. With the recompense of God, he will come and save you. What is being compelled, what the Lord, how he's encouraging us to trust in him here is passively.

[20:16] Trust in me. It is not a type of action that is to take life by the horns. But rather to trust in the Lord in the difficulties that we are going through.

Recognizing first that we have needs. Verses 3. That our hands are weak. That our knees are feeble. That our hearts are anxious.

And then going to the Lord to trust in him. To look to him. To just be honest with him. To not give him the solution to our problems but say this is the problem. If you are new to the Christian faith or are looking into it, it is hard to be a committed and faithful Christian throughout one's life.

Like I mentioned before, doubts and struggles, they are real. Strain on one's faith is maybe more common than we'd like to admit.

But I'll say this. It's even harder to be a committed, faithful Christian when we are detached from the source of our strength to live a Christian life.

[21:30] That is Christ. We try to live a Christian life without Christ. We can go through the motions for only so long. But we will be devoid of the power we need to live faithfully.

To endure. So, it's remarkable that this is an Advent prophecy. Because the incarnation is the very strength we need.

How? Why? Because Christ comes to bring a foretaste of this eternal promise for us. God doesn't say, in the far distant future, you will enjoy joy and gladness forevermore.

When it will come, not sure, but just endure. No, he sends Jesus to take upon human flesh and to give us a foretaste of what is to come.

Look with me at verses 5 to 6. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

[ 22 : 36 ] All the Gospels record these miracles. All of them see Jesus do these things. But here's the interesting thing about it.

It is not just for the sake of Jesus gathering. It is for the purpose of bringing heaven to earth.

If the incarnation, and we'll look at this on Christmas Eve, but if heaven comes to earth, so too does the culture of heaven. So that what we see in the Gospels is like God saying, listen, it's coming.

I promise. And I'm just going to send just a taste of it. So you know what is around the corner. John the Baptist understood this. Luke chapter 7 verses 18 to 23.

John sends disciples to talk to Jesus, asking very specifically if he is going to usher in the kingdom of heaven, if he's the Messiah. And this is what it says, verses 18 and following. The disciples of John reported all these things to him.

[ 23 : 59 ] And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, that is Jesus, saying, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? And when the men had come to him, they said, John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?

In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. Verse 22.

And Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear.

The dead are raised up, the poor have good news, preach to them, and blessed is the one who is not offended by me. John and his disciples understood that Jesus was no mere miracle worker, working the crowds, gaining a cult following.

They knew something was significant about him, and they asked him, Are you the Messiah? And he says yes. But what does he do? He quotes Isaiah 35.

[ 25 : 08 ] He quotes Isaiah 35. He's saying, Listen, it is fulfilled. And you can't separate verses 4, you can't separate verses 5 and 6 out of this entire chapter.

It is all woven together. So what we see Jesus do, fulfilling verses 5 and 6, give us proof, tell us that what is about to come in its fullness will indeed happen, that life is springing up from death.

It is a promise for us that will help us to endure the difficulties of this life. Yet the joys and the blessings of this restored creation, they're not the pinnacle of this messianic redemption.

Remember, this is the second exodus that sees slaves become freed, freed to enjoy the source and substance of goodness for all eternity. Slaves are freed, not just from slavery, but for something else.

And this next section, verses 8 to 10, speak to slaves being freed for the life to come, which is to enjoy the promised land, being in the presence of the Lord.

[ 26 : 28 ] So we'll get to our third promise, and it is this, the promise of the enjoyment of goodness forever. Look with me at verses 8 to 10.

And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the way of holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, it shall belong to those who walk on the way.

Even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beasts come up on it. They shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

The ransomed and redeemed shall return to the Lord. And what will mark them is holiness, joy, and gladness. What will mark the people of the Lord will be the very things that most of us, if not all of us, are striving after in all the wrong places.

[ 27 : 43 ] And the thing about these last few verses is that it doesn't speak of God just giving us a little taste or a little sprinkle or giving us this joy and this holiness and this gladness just for a portion of our eternity, but it speaks of the abundance of God forever, giving us the very things that we desire most.

He will make a way. It speaks of this highway through this oasis, and it is called the way of holiness. It is visible. It is unmistakable.

All who want to come are welcomed to come as long as they are holy, which is to say, if we put it in context with the rest of the chapter, those that recognize their weakness and call upon the Lord to be saved.

So that when it says here that there will be no unclean, what does it say, the unclean shall not pass over it, that is not so much a comment on a specific type of person, but rather people who have disqualified themselves in their pride and not have embraced the gospel message of Christ.

And this gift that God is giving us, it will not expire, it will not get tarnished, there will be no going back to a life of slavery. I'll just wrap up with this.

[ 29 : 19 ] The thing about a spiritual journey or a journey to find meaning and purpose, belonging, etc., is that all too often the journey almost becomes the destination.

we're forever journeying, we're forever looking, we're forever striving, we're forever trying to better ourselves, but we're never arriving, we're never finding the end to our journey.

verse 10 tells us that there will be a time where we do arrive. That all of the difficulty, all of our hopes, all of our desires, they will be met, and that the strivings, the journeying, it will end.

And it will end in, not disappointment, but in absolute glory, gladness, and joy. If you have picked up, Isaiah 35 begins and ends with the same thing, with gladness and with joy.

Verse 1 and verse 10, gladness and joy. This is what awaits those who put their trust and hope in the one true God.

[ 30 : 38 ] This is what Jesus came to do. God did not say to us, journey forever until you reach me. He says, I will journey down and I will meet you where you are at.

I will build a home for you. So when Christ goes back up to heaven at the ascension, he sits at the right hand of God, this is what we affirm in our creed, but it says also that he is forever interceding for us and he himself tells his disciples and tells us that he is making a home for us.

Our homeless feelings, our lack of place here on earth will find its fulfillment because Christ himself has gone to make a home for us. But first he came down to earth and even though he was born to Mary in Bethlehem, he had no home.

He had no place to lay his head and Christ was homeless so that we could have a home with him. So to conclude, the chapter ends with gladness, joy and singing and I will just say this, this is not a lesser life.

This is not a subpar plan B but this is life and life to its fullness. This is what the Lord God is inviting us to.

[ 31 : 57 ] A desert that blooms, a highway of holiness that is unmistakable and a life eternal marked by joy, holiness and gladness. Let's pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for the incarnation.

We thank you that Christ came down to live and experience all that there was to experience in the human condition including this feeling of homelessness.

And Lord, we thank you that he conquered death, he brought us out of slavery to sin, that he completed the second exodus and that our future secure in him is one of joy and gladness and holiness, singing and song, merriment, all the joys of life.

Lord, help us to this last, these last few days leading up to Christmas to prepare our hearts to rightly receive Christ as he comes in human form, fully man, fully God, to save us from ourselves. to save us from sin, to save us from death. We pray all of this in his mighty name. Amen.