

Isaiah 35:1-10

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[0 : 00] Let us pray as we stand. Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts this morning be pleasing and acceptable in your sight.

! O Lord, our Maker and our Redeemer. Amen. You may be seated. I'm just catching you up on where we're at.

We're in the third Sunday of Advent, the third Sunday in the book of Isaiah. And Isaiah is a book designed to heighten our longing for the coming of Jesus.

So it's a perfect book for the church to read in the season of Advent. Because Isaiah gives us these pictures of the Messiah. Pictures that so vividly describe who he is and so dramatically and captivantly describe what salvation will look like when he comes.

That it's hard to read the book of Isaiah without feeling like you've come face to face with Jesus himself. And the word that we are hearing from Isaiah today is a word in Isaiah chapter 35.

[1 : 14] If you've closed your Bible, would you please go there with me? Isaiah 35, page 595. And it is a word particularly to those who feel the weight of the world on their shoulders.

Or those who feel the turmoil of the world in their hearts. Notice, get right in verse 4. Say to those who have an anxious heart, fear not.

Be strong. Fear not. Right in the middle of verse 4, God gives his people a strengthening word. Or he gives a strengthening word to Isaiah to speak over his people.

Be strong. Fear not. And it's given to a people who are anything but strong and fearless. So you look in verse 3. These people are described as those who have weak hands and feeble knees. In other words, they're so depressed by what they see going on in the world around them, they've lost all motivation and courage. And then in verse 4, they're described as those who have an anxious heart. It's not just that they've lost motivation and courage by the world, what's going on in the world around them.

[2 : 19] They have internalized the worries of the world in their own hearts. And so God gives his people today, through the prophet Isaiah, a word for those who are living in anxiety and fear.

I was looking up the bestseller book lists this Christmas. I was thinking, I should get my wife a book, you know. And I was stunned by the titles I discovered there.

The Anxious Generation, How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness. Next title, Addicted to Anxiety, How to Break the Habit.

Next title, Unwinding Anxiety. New Science Shows How to Break the Cycles of Worry and Fear and Heal Your Mind. I cannot wait to read that science.

And the list goes on, right? I mean, my wife sent me a meme kind of this last week that had two boxes. It had a picture of a priest on Sunday saying, hope, peace, joy, and all calm and collected.

[3 : 25] Let's wait for the Savior together and pray. And then I had that minister on Monday morning saying, get the service sheets ready. Buy more candles. Sing better, choir. And, you know, all these sorts of things.

And just kind of going crazy and a hustle and a bustle. And all of us have this personal experience of this in some way in this season. Where the hurry of life means that we have these wonderful moments where we're kind of cloistered together.

And we sing of his praise and our peace. And yet it feels like there's a disjunct between that and what we're experiencing on Monday through Saturday. We're anxious. We're hurried.

We're afraid. And this isn't just a personal phenomenon. Although the question, what are you afraid of, is one of the most personal questions anybody could ask us. What keeps you at night?

What makes you anxious in the morning? So personal. But this is a political and a cultural phenomenon. It's like the air we breathe.

[4 : 26] And this is actually the context that Isaiah 35 is being spoken into. It's not just being spoken to a people who are anxious just in general about anything. It's being spoken to a people who are anxious in particular about what they see happening in the world around them geopolitically and internationally.

So the original context is international politics. And if you were to read chapter 36 in its entirety, I invite you to do that later. Or if you get bored in the sermon, you can do it now.

Assyria is about to attack and overtake the northern kingdom, the kingdom of Judah, the people of God. Syria is about to attack their cities and take over. And God's people are getting scared because they see threats knocking on their doorstep.

And so they start figuring out who's going to protect us. And they start looking to other nations for allies. And interestingly, they start looking to Egypt. Egypt, and they say, Egypt, maybe you have the power to protect us.

And if you know the Bible at all, Egypt is not the place you go. That's the place that God freed you from. And so if you're going to Egypt, it shows you don't trust that God has what it takes to protect you in this moment.

[5 : 36] You don't trust that God has what it takes to meet your fears and give you strength. You don't trust that God has what it takes to soothe your anxieties and give you true peace. And so they're looking to Egypt.

And yet the king of Assyria is over here. And the king of Assyria is saying to Israel, saying, Don't let your king, Hezekiah, convince you to trust in the Lord.

You don't need to trust in the Lord. You can actually trust in me. Yeah, we're going to take you guys over. But we'll take care of you at the same time. Don't worry about it. And so you have Israel sitting there, seeing threat of attack, this political, international context, worried about what's going on in the world.

They're tempted to go back to Egypt and trust Egypt instead of the Lord. And over here you have the king of Assyria saying, trust me instead. And it's in that context that this word is spoken.

Be strong, fear not. Be strong, fear not. And we could outline the fears that are going on in our world right now as well, couldn't we?

[6 : 45] I mean, I remember preaching this a few years ago for the first time, and a book was just released in the U.S. called Fear, Trump and the White House. And I'm not making a political statement here.

It was just like, it was all about how the campaign was run on capitalizing on people's fears, and then yet all the media coverage is about capitalizing on people's fears.

And then an article was released at that exact same time on Brexit, because Brexit was happening. And it was saying the negotiations between the U.K. and the E.U. not going so well.

The E.U. is afraid of the U.K., and Theresa May is afraid of the E.U. Now, I didn't agree with everything in the article, but what I found so interesting about it is that they kind of described the whole relationship between Europe and the U.K. in terms of who's afraid of what and who's afraid of whom.

And then at the exact same time, an Economist article was released called Markets in an Age of Fear and Anxiety. And it was analyzing how widespread cultural and social fear and anxiety is destabilizing our global markets and economy.

[8 : 01] And almost all the business owners that I talk to right now on the other side of the border in the U.S. and here in Canada are just sitting tight saying, when's the next tariff going to hit? When's the next thing going to happen that is going to destabilize my business, that is going to mean I'm going to have to move out of this city and find somewhere cheaper to live, and you name it, and the fears and the anxieties just rise and rise and rise.

Because there is so much in the world that's outside of our control, and we know it. Be strong and fear not, says God.

Really? Now, this is one of those lines that you could make into a T-shirt, right? This is one of those lines you could put on a headband.

I don't think anybody wears headbands anymore. But you put it on a toque or a hat, or you could slap it on people's lives and just say, you know, faith over fear. And it's one of those band-aids that never really heals the wound and the worry.

But yet, God says, be strong and fear not. And why is the question. Why? And the answer comes in verse 4. He has to say it twice so that we get it.

[9 : 08] Behold, your God will come. Your God will come. He says, with vengeance and with recompense of God. In other words, God's going to deal with your enemies.

And here it is again at the end of verse 4. He will come, and he will save you. Fear not. Now, do you remember that it's the same message that resounds in the opening chapters of Luke's gospel? Remember when the angels arrived? There's four different times in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel when the angels arrived to all these different people. And the very first words they speak every time is, fear not or do not be afraid. On the one hand, it makes sense.

Because if you see an angel, you're like, hoo-hoo. I'm a little scared. What's going on here? Not everyday occurrence. But on the other hand, I think it's getting at something more. It's, fear not, the angels say to the shepherds.

For behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the King.

[10 : 12] And that's the exact message that's at the heart of Isaiah 35. You don't have to be afraid because you have a Savior. He will come. He's coming for you, and he will save you.

And what I love about Isaiah 35 is that this is the central message, is do not be afraid. Be strong. God is coming to save you. And yet, it only takes up two verses.

The whole rest of the passage is surrounded by three poetic images that describe what it will look like when Christ comes, and he brings the saving mercy of God. And it's meant to anchor our hearts in the hope of the future.

It's meant to make us know that no matter what is going on in the world right now that is giving us anxiety and keeping us up at night, it is in the sovereign hands of God, and all will be well because he is coming to restore the world.

The world is in his hands. And so we get three poetic images, an image of a restored creation, and a restored humanity within that creation, and then restored joy within that restored humanity within that restored creation.

[11 : 18] Let's begin with restored creation. Verse 1. I love this. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. Growing up in California, I identify with this.

The desert shall rejoice and blossom like a crocus. Those of you that know plants, the crocus is the first thing that comes up in the spring, right? You know that life's on the way.

Verse 2. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy in singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, and the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord and the majesty of our God. So the first image is of a restored creation, a desert becoming a paradise, full of God's glory and majesty and full of joy.

And then if you skip down to verse 6, the middle of verse 6. For waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

[12 : 27] In the haunt of jackals where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. And so the image here is of a desert being filled with water, vegetation growing tall and full.

And a place that used to be a place of danger and death, now becoming an oasis of protection and life. So grass and jackals.

Jackals are kind of like the skeletons of animals that have been eaten and destroyed. And grass is something low. It's not something that you can hide in or be protected in. And yet describes reeds and rushes growing tall.

So it's a place where animals can hide and find safety and protection in an oasis. And so we get this vision of a new creation that is buoyant with growth and vegetation and life and flowing streams and joy and singing.

Like the place that is a place of groaning has become a place of rejoicing. And it's beautiful. Isaiah mentions the glory of Lebanon. And Lebanon was known for its tall cedar trees.

[13 : 33] So it's like saying the glory of Stanley Park. And then he says the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. And Sharon was a particularly fertile and rich plain at the bottom of Mount Carmel where all sorts of flora and fauna could flourish.

It's like saying the majesty of Van Dusen Gardens in June. Or April if you prefer. They're both symbols of abundance.

And we're reminded of Paul's words. Yeah, creation groans. And yet here Isaiah says when the Lord comes, creation groaning, creation's groaning will become creation's flourishing. And creation's flourishing will become creation's rejoicing. Because when the Messiah comes, everything that has been unfruitful and futile because of human sin will be made to blossom and bloom because of God's grace.

And the glory and majesty of the Lord will cover the face of the earth as the waters cover the sea. And so Isaiah speaks to the people of God and says, be strong, fear not, because when God comes, all creation will be restored.

[14 : 42] Man, we long for that day. Come, Lord Jesus, come. And then he gives us an image of a restored humanity. And we see this in verse 5.

This is the second image. 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. In other words, all human faculties are healed. And humanity is thriving and singing.

The ears and the eyes are the receptive human faculties. It's how we take things in. And then leaping and singing are active human faculties.

As we pursue things and praise things out. And so combined, they express the totality of the human person. Being healed and restored by God.

[15 : 39] But it's not just about physical healing and restoration. It's also about social healing and restoration. Because think about it. Eyes and ears and tongue, those are all the physical instruments of interpersonal communication.

Without tongue, without eyes, without ears, there's no communication. Seeing a person's face is significant to us. And hearing and being able to respond to their words in conversation is significant to us.

And so the image is not just of physical restoration of our humanity. But also the restoration of our communication. And our relationships. And our community. And it's not just about social restoration. It's about spiritual restoration. Because throughout the book of Isaiah, the eyes and the ears are images for spiritual and moral realities. Eyes are often associated with pride.

We're blind to the vulnerable of society. And we're blind to God. And the ears are often associated with being deaf. We are unresponsive to the Lord's invitation to turn to him and be healed.

[16 : 43] And so what we have here is nothing short of a vision of the kingdom of God. Humanity restored physically and socially and spiritually. And it's no mistake that in Matthew chapter 11, which was our second reading today, John the Baptist, when he starts hearing about Jesus healing people who are lame and healing their eyes.

And making the deaf to be able to hear again. John the Baptist sends word to Jesus and says, Are you the one that we've been waiting for to come? Like, are you it?

Because we've been praying for this for centuries. And I want to know if you're the real deal. And if you're not, we need to be looking elsewhere. For somebody else to come. And all Jesus says in response is, Go tell John.

And he just quotes Isaiah 35, verses 5 and 6. He says, Go tell John what you see and hear. That the blind receive their sight. And the lame are walking.

And the lepers are cleansed. And the deaf are hearing. In other words, God is here. Salvation has come. And these signs of healings that Jesus does are not signs that in this life, everything is going to be healed and restored all at once.

[17 : 54] It takes time. We know where this is heading. But what it is, is it gives us little portals into the new creation when humanity will be fully restored. It gives us visions of the hope to come.

And helps us know that the king has come. He is in our midst. And he is doing what God said he would do so many years ago. We have a restored humanity in the midst of a restored creation. And the third image that we are given is that restored humanity has restored joy. Verse 8. Verse 9. This is the word of the Lord.

It is a vision of a holy highway from the desert to Zion. I tend to long for the day when there are no more highways.

[19 : 27] And that this is a holy highway. And Zion is, remember, the place of Jerusalem. It's the place where the temple is. It's the place where God's glory and presence dwell.

And so the redeemed and the ransomed return by this highway. Nothing unclean or dangerous or threatening comes with them. And they enter into the place of their eternal joy, which is the eternal presence of God Almighty.

And when we have the fullness of God's presence, we will not know the fullness or any hint of sorrow or sighing anymore. We will see the one for whom we were created.

Throughout the book of Isaiah, we're told that God will make a way through the desert. He will make a highway. And he doesn't take his people out of the desert all at once.

But he does promise he will make a way of holiness, guiding his people until they find themselves restored in his presence again. And this is why it's so powerful, once again, when John the Baptist comes on the scene.

[20 : 32] And he says his job is to prepare the way of the Lord. And this is why it's so significant when Jesus, in John chapter 14, says, I am the way and the truth and the life.

Because throughout the Bible, God's people are depicted as being redeemed and ransomed. And then taken on a journey towards the fullness of joy in the presence of God. And we are being told in the New Testament that Jesus is the only way to get there.

He is the highway of holiness. He is the one who is bringing us from the desert to the promised land. And while in this life there, our joy is always mingled with sorrow and sighing.

Our rejoicing is always mingled with groaning. We're told that there will come a day when sorrow and sighing will not just be no more. It will flee. It will run 100 miles an hour the other direction.

We'll be going this way on the highway and it will be going that way. God will dwell with us and we will be his people. He will wipe every tear from our eye.

[21 : 40] No more crying and mourning and pain anymore. Our ears that were once deaf will hear him say, Behold, I have made all things new. And our eyes which were once blind will behold the glory of the Lord covering the whole face of the earth.

And on that day our traveling will turn into arriving. And there will be gladness and joy that overwhelms us for the rest of eternity. Be strong and fear not.

Because when I come, there will be restored joy in a restored humanity, in a restored creation. And brothers and sisters, when we go out of this room, we're going to once again start feeling fear and anxiety again.

Some of you will have trouble sleeping tonight because there will be things on your mind. Some of you will wake up thinking about the world. Some of you will scroll through your phone and read of the new events and wonder, How is this going to affect me?

How is this going to affect my friends? How is this going to affect our city? And in the midst of that, God wants to say to you, Be strong. Fear not. I'm coming for you. I will save you.

[22 : 47] Look to me. Wait for me. Trust in me. Everything is in my hands. All will be well again.

So we pray together. Yes, Lord. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Do what you've said you will do. And be our king.

And let us praise you with great joy. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.