

*<sup>1</sup> The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> 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.*

**Intro:** I've been sketching pictures with the messages from Isaiah in Advent. **[Show pictures:]**

- 1) refer back to Is.ch.2 - see sermon from Dec. 1<sup>st</sup>
- 2) refer back to Is. Ch.11, with quote vs.1&10 – see sermon from Dec.8<sup>th</sup>

I won't attempt today to capture on paper the pictures painted by Isaiah here (ch.35). Instead, use the canvass of your mind. Let these words themselves be the brush that draws the picture for you...

It's 700 years before Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. But the Lord gives Isaiah a picture of the Savior walking on the scene.

- He walks along, and wherever he sets foot life springs up: flowers erupting in carpets of color across the desert floor. Joy and singing fill the air. [You see: nature is used to picture what change & transformation his coming brings for human hearts.]
- People have gathered. They see him: God come to save us. He walks through the midst of them. He smiles – then pauses mid-smile. He veers to his right a few steps – and there the eyes of the blind, to whom he has strode over, open to see him flash his smile at the sight of them. He walks on. He greets the deaf, and their ears open to hear his "shalom." He touches the shoulders of the lame & the mute sitting alongside the road. And the lame jump up and follow in the Savior's trail, to the sound of the mute tongues crescendoing chorus.

Do you have this image sketched in your mind? Awesome! There's no other way to describe the scene.

But... it's easy to have faith flicker and to have truth fade in our memory.

This is a season of joy – festive gatherings mark the days. Candlelight shines an atmosphere of peace. But there are dark undercurrents flowing too. A Meditation’s devotion this past week listed things of the season: “Christmas is cookies and cakes and presents and a host of other pleasant things. It is sitting with relatives around a table ...” But crowds might not mix well with the PTSD effects you experience. Frustration sets in when you have to decline or make an early departure from the holiday gathering because the festiveness is a little too much.

And you know what happened yesterday? We held a celebration here with the kids! Right. But I was also referring to how the same day marked the anniversary of the tragedy the families of Newtown Connecticut experienced last year.

Where do you point someone shaken by tragedy, sad over loss, exhausted from fatigue, overwhelmed by festivities?

There are so many different facets to our lives that stir turmoil within us:

- Many here this morning have faced their own days of trauma... like the sudden tragic loss of a loved one. My family and I have. Some of you have shared with me the trauma/loss you’ve faced.
- There’s another kind of trauma felt when someone you thought you knew, turned out to be living a different life, or decided to move on in life without you.
- I suppose I could go on with examples. But you each know what you’ve been through. And you know what you’d like changed in your life: something you’d like fixed, or something you feel is missing. What about when the change you hope for – or even expect – doesn’t materialize?

Our problem isn’t that we haven’t heard about Jesus. We – gathered here – know that Jesus came to take away our sin. We also encounter the pain and disappointments a walk through life in this world brings. And the turmoil they stir can lead us to wonder: How do these fit? How does this go along with my Savior’s love? I know I have a Savior. I know he cares. I treasure the promises of his love. And yet here I am with so much that doesn’t seem to be getting better.

Bring back John’s story, which we heard in our Gospel lesson. Jesus’ response to John the Baptizer helps us. John knew the reason Jesus had come: He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John had pierced the Judean sky with that news. But as he sat in a prison cell, he saw and felt his cold, harsh surroundings. He may have been thinking: this isn’t quite living up to the change we had anticipated. Whatever it was that sparked his inner turmoil, we know his question. He sent it by messengers, and awaited their return: *“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* What happens then?

Jesus didn’t shame John. He answered him. John, in his weakness, came in faith to the right one – not only for answers, but for strength too.

Our God through his Word provides us answers and strength. Come to him! Jesus answered John by pointing to the words of Isaiah that we are looking at today. Here are the answers our God gives to us too. Look with me:

It is the good news of Jesus that steadies & strengthens & imparts peace and confidence (vs.3-4). Images that embody fear – weak hands, shaky knees, hearts anxious – form the backdrop for the good news delivery: *“Don’t be afraid. You’ve got one big problem. And the remedy is: Your God will come – he will come to save you.”*

“But does that **‘you’** include ‘me’?”, you might wonder. “Because today all the talk of turmoil, disappointment and doubt has drawn back up the images fresh in my memory of my many failures. I see when my ‘shaky kneed’ heart has led me to wobble off from a firm stand on God’s truth. He says, *‘Don’t be afraid!’* But I so often have. He calls me to himself in the face of disappointment or pain, so that he might provide healing & comfort. But I’ve gone off in frustration (thinking: ‘looks like I’m going it alone’), or in anger (‘thanks a lot, God!’), or in uncertainty (‘how much does He care for me?’). I hear Isaiah mention *‘unclean’* & *‘fools’* – I’ve earned those labels – I hear him say *‘God will come with vengeance’* – I deserve the full measure of his wrath for sin.”

But the same one who came with judgment came *to save you*. And to save you he took the full wrath that your sin deserved. Every bit of God’s punishment fell upon God the Son – Jesus. This is why he came! And he gifts the benefit to you through faith – to all who trust in him.

- Isaiah says, “Your God will come to save you.” And Jesus stood upon the earth some 700 years later, and said: “I have come to give my life as a ransom. This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sins. I came down from heaven. Anyone who looks to me, the Son, and believes in me shall have eternal life.”

When Isaiah sees the *“redeemed”* walking on the way to heaven, that’s you. When he describes the *“ransomed of the Lord,”* you are the picture Isaiah paints. The one our God bought – you! One he gifted with faith in Jesus – you! He washed you clean – robed you in his own righteousness.

Everything about *you* is changed by God’s grace. See it?! Sure life will go on, and you will undoubtedly experience your share of the disappointments, pain and turmoil that comes with a walk through life. It is easy at such times to get feeling weak in the knees (spiritually, right?), to have hands that feel too shaky for the work God has given us, to have fear start filling our hearts.

What do we do? We return to Jesus, like John the Baptizer. We surround ourselves with the pictures on the pages of Isaiah. We place them alongside Jesus’ life. We see our Savior fulfilled his promise to come, and he has loved us – does love us! – with the greatest love. He gifts forgiveness to us, and sets our feet on the road to heaven. He even opens the door to give us a peek into the life that awaits us there at the end of our earthly walk. Isaiah holds open the door to heaven at the end of ch.35: *“everlasting joy will crown our heads. Gladness and joy will overtake us, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”*

**Conclusion:** When we look at Isaiah's pictures, when we return to Jesus, our God does amazing things! Strength returns to tired hands & legs, and peace flows through our hearts. Not perfect strength and peace, but strength enough. And when we think about the perfect joy in heaven and the songs we'll sing there, we are lifted to sing songs of joy here. Not perfect songs, and not perfect joy - but joy enough. For these songs ring with the melody of God's truth: "Be strong! Do not fear! Our God has come! Our God has bought us at the price of his own blood. Our God will come again! He will come to take you & me home with him."

Come, Lord Jesus! Amen. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.