



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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September 24, 2006
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 35:4-7a
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 146
Second Lesson: James 1:17-27
Gospel: Mark 7:31-37

Be Strong, Do Not Fear

Is there a place where as a kid you used to go to feel safe? Is there a place now where you go when you are worried to feel safe and secure? A place where you don't have to worry or be afraid? When I was a kid growing up, the place where I felt the safest and where I felt, in many ways the best, was on a Sunday morning when I did what you just did. When I sat back down on the pew and I was sitting next to my dad and the pastor would start talking and my dad would put his arm out on the pew bench and I would snuggle in right beside him and put my head on his chest or shoulder and just listen to the sermon. It was the safest place in the world to be sitting and snuggling that close to my dad.

As I got older, I might not have snuggled in, but it was a place that I still enjoyed because on the way to go to eat at Sullivan's—we went there every Sunday after worship—on the way there, we would debate the sermon. He would take one side and I would take the other. It didn't matter if we agreed with each other or not, we just would debate the sermon. I probably learned as much during those 20-minute rides as I did during the 20-minute sermons. The place where I felt safe and secure—although right now, if my dad was here visiting and we had a guest pastor and I was sitting in the pew and I was snuggled up under his arm and had my head on his chest, you would be worried about me now, wouldn't you?

Our God wants us to have that kind of safe and secure feeling. He knows that we are going to need it very often as we live in this world because we are living in a world that is infected by sin—a world that is going to have many things that are going to give us weak knees and shake us to our very core of who we are. That is why our God comes to us this morning through Isaiah some 2700 years ago when he wrote the words, "*Be strong, do not fear*" (Isaiah 35:4). Now when God had Isaiah write these words, he said to them, "because *your God will come*" (Isaiah 35:4) and then he describes how God is going to do great things. But as you and I are gather together this morning, our God still says to us, "*Be strong, do not fear,*" but now he says, "because your God has come and because your God has done great things." That is what we need to remember. Our God did come and he did do great things for us because there are going to be things that shake us.

If you have ever read the Book of Isaiah, when you are reading it you kind of need to keep in mind that Chapters 1-39 are kind of unified in that God is warning the Israelites through the prophet, "Turn away from your sins. Turn back to me and if you don't, judgment is coming. You are going to be taken off into exile. You are going to be gone,

away from Jerusalem, away from my temple. You are going to be gone. You are not going to be here if you don't turn back to me now!" Then in Chapter 40-66, it turns to God speaking to those as though they already are in exile and telling them, "I am going to bring you back. I am going to deliver you and I am going to bring you peace and safety." The words I read to you a little bit ago come from that first section of judgment so you see that even when he is talking about this judgment, there are these flashes of his gospel promises, of his love and of his tenderness. In the Chapters right before this, he had laid out some pretty strong words about his judgment on the nations surrounding the children of Israel and on his judgments on the children of Israel. So there are plenty of things where he says, "The world is a bad place to live in, but you know what? Because you are turning away from me, it is going to get even worse for you."

But then after that he comes to this incredible picture of his love and his forgiveness and his grace. He says, "But even as you face these things and as your hearts are afraid, remember this—*"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you"* (Isaiah 35:4). The coming he is talking about is the Messiah. He isn't talking here about the coming Last Judgment. He is talking about the Messiah who is going to come. "And then when the Messiah comes, he is going to do great things. This will be the sign to you that God is among you and that your God has come to you when you see *'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'* (Isaiah 35:5,6), then you will know that God kept his Word."

Isn't that what we heard in our gospel?—Jesus healing the man who couldn't talk and who couldn't hear. You know the rest of the story in the gospel—all the times that Jesus demonstrated his power. He demonstrated his authority by casting out demons and doing miracles to show that God was among them, that one who had authority that is divine was among them.

God did come and when he did come, he did do great things—not just the healings that he talks about, but look at that last part that God had Isaiah write. He talks about in the desert and in the wilderness—a place that we think of as barren and lifeless, right? It has a life unto itself, but in general we think of it as barren and lifeless because there is a lack of water. He says in those places that you guys think of as barren and lifeless, *"Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs"* (Isaiah 35:6,7). Another great thing God is going to do is bring life where there was only death, where there was nothing. Your God has done great things. He did that. Do you want the proof? Do you want to see the pools? Do you want to see the streams? Do you want to see the water gushing forth?

Look around you. Look at the person beside you, behind you, in front of you—if you want to crank your neck and look in the balcony—look at those above you. This is the water gushing in the desert. God brought spiritual life to those who were spiritually dead. He did it through Jesus' life and death in our place, where God took our sins, put them on Jesus and where the righteousness, the perfection, the *'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy'* (Leviticus 19:2) that God demands of us—he gave it to us

because Jesus was perfect in our place. That is how he brought life where there was spiritual death.

When you look around and think about all the years since Isaiah wrote this, God kept his promise. Yes, he did come and he has done great things and the thing is that he still does great things. That is why God says, “Be strong, don’t be afraid, because I am a powerful God who loves you with an everlasting love and the things of this world that shake you to your core will not overcome you when you look to me, because I am that strong, I am that powerful, and I am that loving.”

God doesn’t tell us to look inside ourselves. Don’t look at our own abilities when we are struggling with things that shake us to our core. He tells us to flee to him. We know this. We have head knowledge of this and through our confession of faith; I would say we have heart knowledge of this. But at times, do we struggle with this truth? Do we forget this simple truth that our God came and he did great things for us and he does great things in us? The devil is still working in this world and we still have a sinful nature, so I think the answer is obvious—certainly at times we forget the simple truth that God does great things among us. Think of our natural tendency toward being negative. Isn’t that in evidence at times when we are always talking about the negative that we forget the great things God is doing among us?

After we moved here 4½ years ago or whatever it is now, an area pastor—I had met him once before—second time I met him was on a Sunday afternoon. I said, “Hello. How are you doing?” He said, “I heard you picked unsingable songs this morning.” That was his greeting to me. Someone came to worship, evidently sang God’s praises, heard that he lived and died for us and walked away with “Those hymns are unsingable.” Do we forget the great things God has done for us and focus on the things that we don’t like? Sure we have a tendency to do that, don’t we?

I see God doing great things among us, not only as individuals, but as a congregation and as a school. God has blessed us greatly. Look at the growth of the congregation and the growth of the school and you will see how God is blessing us and yet, sometimes don’t we—instead of falling on our knees and saying, “Thank you Lord for the incredible things you have done”—tend to focus on the negative? Do we at times wring our hands and say, “Woe is us. We have an operating debt of \$100,000. Things are awful.” We forget that our God has done great things for us. Sometimes we forget that God has blessed us. Three years ago we had \$80,000 in debt and in those three years we have done an awful lot of things here in our congregation to enhance our gospel ministry and now our debt stands at \$100,000. Sometimes we forget about the great things God has done for us and we act as though he didn’t come and he didn’t die and he didn’t take away our sins and he didn’t promise to be with us. The gospel of our God is powerful. Focusing on it and talking about the great things God is doing for us will take some of that fear out of our hearts.

When I go visit people in the hospitals, I am not telling them anything they don’t know. When they are fearful or worried about the sickness or what is going to happen or what the test result is going to be, I don’t tell them that it will be alright because I don’t know

that. I tell them what I do know and what they know. God loves them. God took away their sins. God loves them so much he spread his arms out on a cross and died for them. The God who loves us that much will not desert us when we are facing difficulty. That is our confidence. He has done great things and he still does great things through us. So when we focus on that truth, it helps us deal with the things that make us frightened.

On a congregational level, I heard a cool story this last week—the kind of things that I wish we would talk more about. A family that has young children going to our school in preschool and kindergarten just moved into the area and didn't have a church home before and didn't know an awful lot about eternal life or salvation. The mom told me that they pulled into a McDonald's and the kids were all excited. That sounds normal, right? What kid isn't excited about going to McDonald's, but that is not why they were excited. They were excited because a seagull landed on the hood. Tell me, when is the last time or any time in your life when you were excited because a seagull landed on your hood? But they were excited because this little 4-year-old and 5-year-old said, "Look Mom! It's the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove!"

To go from not knowing who Christ is to seeing God in daily life— isn't that an amazing gift of our God that we together have the privilege of doing?—sharing Christ with one another and with our children so we can be strong and not be afraid.