

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; ² it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God; you God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸ 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. ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰ And the ransomed 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.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

FIRST READING: John 1:1-5, 9-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome^[a] it...⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

“God with Us”

Sometimes there is little which can be said to improve on the beautiful imagery of a scriptural passage. For some texts we cannot increase their energy and zest with our most eloquent comments. Our words, added to the lyrics of some of the Bible’s poetry, just make them plain and give them over to simple, everyday prose. That is how I feel as I venture to preach on this amazing passage from the prophesy of Isaiah this morning. Possibly only music is truly up to the task. As Reinhold Niebuhr once said, “*No preacher is really up to the subject of the incarnation. Better to turn things over to the musicians.*”¹ Right! But regardless, let’s today humbly look at a portion of these ancient and sacred words and let the Spirit teach us.

“*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.’*” (repeat). Ah, yes, Isaiah is making a foundational point, isn’t he? He’s presenting what is the bedrock of the Gospel, in fact. If you read much of the Bible at all, you will discover that, from beginning to end, we are told to not fear. It seems that the message continually is that when God comes, there will be a radical transformation from what is; things will be reorganized, reordered, changed, and there will be peace....peace among the nations, peace between enemies, peace in every human heart. And because of this, we need not be afraid.²

Rev. John Buchanan says that the reason why the Bible says so much regarding fear is that “*Fear is an enemy of life. It’s hard to love when you’re afraid. It’s hard to care when you are afraid. It’s impossible to be joyful when you’re afraid. Real fear causes us to have tunnel vision so that our brains cannot focus on anything else. So ultimately, fear limits life, constrains it, causes us to abandon core values and live by it instead of by God’s intention for us.*”³

So, through Isaiah, God calls us....and he equips us to live without fear. “*Do not fear!*,” he says “*Behold, your God.*” Isaiah’s original audience were the Israelites, a people who were separated from their land and the God who chose them. They drifted away, choosing other gods

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr. Quoted in J Buchanan. “*Courage*” <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/121607.html?mint=true> (accessed 12-9-2022).

² Charles Cousar. Paraphrased from John Buchanan.

³ John Buchanan. “*Courage*” <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/121607.html?mint=true> (accessed 12-9-2022). (paraphrased).

and self-serving patterns of sin and neglect. They were suffering in exile in Babylon when they first heard Isaiah's prophesy, and they heard God speaking to them, promising a great restoration. They heard in Isaiah's words that there would be a time when God's land and people would be healed....a time when "they would see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of God."

And indeed, many of the exiles DID return to Jerusalem. However, soon, they lived once again under a cloud of fear, still under the thumb of foreign domination. Isaiah's prophesy was not meant to fully become a reality for them until the advent of Jesus centuries later. "It was Jesus who went into the dry wilderness but was not conquered by it. It was Jesus who found food and sustenance in God and revealed God's glory in himself. Jesus calmed the fears of the anxious and broken. He opened the eyes of the blind, unstopped the ears of the deaf, called the lame to walk, opened the mouths of the speechless. He became living water for those dying of spiritual thirst and proclaimed that he was the way in which people could return to God. He faced the ravenous beasts that Isaiah spoke of; the ravenous beasts of human sin. He faced them at the cross, and yet returned from the dead"⁴ Jesus in essence ushered in the Kingdom, the way of God, and lived out what one commentator has called "God's reclamation project for the world". He taught his disciples, us, to do the same.⁵

In Mark Connelly's classic play, "Green Pastures", the angel Gabriel walks on stage with his horn under his arm and approaches the Lord who is deep in thought. God is troubled about what is happening among his people on earth. Humanity has become very sinful and rebellious. God has sent prophets and messengers, but the people have refused to listen. Gabriel offers to blow his horn, the final trumpet sound, and to end the whole thing. But the Lord brushes the horn from Gabriel's lips. The Lord then tells Gabriel, "I am not going to end it, nor send anyone else. I am going myself!"⁶

Indeed, in Jesus Christ, God came to be Emmanuel, "God with us". The Master of the Universe, the Almighty, Sovereign, Creator of all there is and will to be, has come close to us,

⁴ <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/93040788> (accessed 12-9-2022).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Eric Ritz. "Learning from a Little Child" from "500 Sermons from Dynamic Preaching" (www.sermons.com)

in human form. And his coming changes everything. It shows us that we have nothing to fear.

The promises are true. The final battle over sin and the power of death will be won. What Jesus has ushered in will be someday fully realized. As the words of Robert Southwell's ancient carol say, *"This little babe so few days old is come to rifle Satan's fold. All hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself from cold do shake."*⁷ I do love that...knowing hell quakes at the presence of a shivering baby. Evil will not have the last word. Love and compassion and peace and hope are now the realities by which God's kingdom expands on earth. They are what inspire our living and focus our steps.

So, brothers and sisters, from this passage today, it seems the Spirit has for us this lesson. When you and I are inclined to have weak hands and feeble knees, we need look around and be uplifted by evidence of God with us. We need see Jesus there changing the world in the faces of men and women who are kicking habits of addiction, breaking out of the cycles of poverty, defying the odds by being the firsts to do things in their families. We need see him in the eyes of the parents of their children or in husbands/wives of spouses who are disabled as they support their decisions to live with hope. We need see him in the relationships of couples who were on the brink of divorce and are now forgiving each other and working to begin afresh. We need see him in the face of the elderly woman or man, who despite the struggle and obvious pain, comes to church every week as they have all their life. Or we need see Jesus in the center of encircled family members who gather in the emergency department or at the edge of an open grave to comfort each other, hold each other up, and ultimately defy the victory of death.

Yes, dear friends, we need look around. We need remind ourselves that when fear or the cares of the world begins to overtake us, God is with us. Because God is. We need be *as Schia, who was 4 years old when her baby brother was born. "Little Schia began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby. They worried that, like most 4 year olds, she might want to hit or shake him, so they said no. Over time, though, since Schia wasn't showing signs of jealousy, they changed their minds and decided to let her have her private conference with the baby. Elated, Schia went into the baby's room and shut the door, but it opened a crack, just*

⁷ <https://hymnary.org/hymn/WSCW1969/page/139>. (accessed 12-9-2022).

*enough for her curious parents to peek in and listen. They saw little Schia walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his and say, 'Baby, tell me what God feels like. I'm starting to forget.'"*⁸

The babe of Bethlehem, friends, has come to be with us and for us; he has come to remind us that we need simply check our hearts, look around and believe. *"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.'"* Amen.

⁸ Anon. Chicken Soup for the Soul. Quoted in Eric Ritz. *"Learning from a Little Child"* from "500 Sermons from Dynamic Preaching" (www.sermons.com).