

## Isaiah 35:3-7

Quinquagesima, Feb. 11, '24  
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

***Strengthen the weak hands, And make firm the feeble knees. <sup>4</sup> Say to those who are fearful-hearted, "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, With the recompense of God; He will come and save you." <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. <sup>6</sup> Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert. <sup>7</sup> The parched ground shall become a pool, And the thirsty land springs of water; In the habitation of jackals, where each lay, There shall be grass with reeds and rushes.***

The build-up to the 2024 Presidential Election is well underway, which means that over the next nine months, we're going to be seeing endless campaign commercials and hearing debate after debate after debate. And we'll be hearing all sorts of campaign slogans: "Let's finish the job"; "It's time for change"; "Stand for America"; "Make America Great Again!" Among the words that you probably *won't* hear as part of any campaign slogan are "Fear" or "Afraid." I don't think you'll likely hear any politician stand up on the platform of, "I'm afraid for the survival of our nation." But perhaps there *should* be fear for our nation.

Isaiah the prophet preached to the people of Israel during a time when the political climate was fear for the survival of the nation. Isaiah was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and both Judah and its capital city of Jerusalem were facing a number of threats of which many of its inhabitants were unaware. These threats were the direct result of the people who had placed their faith in the wrong gods or who had the wrong type of faith in the true God. That was the case for many of the inhabitants of Judah, but there were *some* who recognized the warning signs.

There were some who were afraid for the long-term survival of their nation. They knew that many of their brethren had a distorted conscience and an artificial faith. These faithful few were afraid; they felt like strangers in their own land. Their own people had turned away from God, and they felt powerless to do anything about it. And it is to these people, these faithful few, to whom Isaiah is speaking, encouraging them by saying, ***"Be strong, do not fear!"***

Maybe you can relate to the feelings of the faithful in Judah. If you pay close attention to the news and to the social climate of our nation, maybe you have the same sorts of fears—fears for our nation's future, or even more importantly for the Christian Church in our country. Perhaps you've recognized so many of your own people turning away from God, so that maybe you feel like a foreigner in your own land. If these are your fears, they seem valid, don't they? After all, things do *not seem to be getting* any better. But if that *is* you, Isaiah offers you these same words of comfort. In the words of our theme:

### **"Be Strong, Do Not Fear!"**

- I. Don't trust what your eyes tell you
- II. Trust what Christ tells you

Is it a good time to be a member of the Church? I don't mean Faith Lutheran Church, I'm talking about the Holy Christian Church. Do you have it good if you are a Christian in the United States of America in 2024? If we just look at the evidence our eyes provide, it really doesn't seem like it! A few years ago,

when I was still living in Wisconsin, our sister congregation in Eau Claire received bomb threats because it was discovered that Messiah Lutheran Church taught that homosexuality is a sin. And it *is* a sin according to God's Word, but that simply doesn't matter anymore to most, and anyone holding to that notion deserves to die according to many. A few years before that, the mayor of Houston, TX demanded that local pastors needed to turn their sermons in weekly for editing and approval by the local government. Thankfully, that was deemed unconstitutional, but you have to ask, "Is this where our country is heading?"

And since all that took place, I became a pastor, and in seven short years, everything seems to have gotten worse. Our nation's general attitude towards Christianity is deteriorating rapidly. For many today, Christianity is a term synonymous with hatred and hypocrisy and bigotry and racism. You might run into people that hate you, *even if they don't even know you*, simply because you're a Christian. Young people are leaving the Church in droves, because it's deemed not-relevant, closed minded, old-fashioned. So, is it a good time to be a member of the Church? The answer is a resounding "no" *if* we only pay attention with our eyes.

So, maybe you are afraid as you think about the future of our congregation here or as you think about the future of our nation. Judging by what we can see, things *seem* to be getting worse, and we all feel pretty powerless to do anything about it. And if that's the case for you—if you're worried, if you're afraid—our Father in heaven has some Words He'd like you to hear: ***"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are fearful-hearted, 'Be strong, do not fear!'"***

Three conditions are mentioned here—weak hands, feeble knees, anxious hearts. They're all symptoms of fear. This is a fear that weakens and deflates, a fear that freezes. It was a fear that the people of Judah likely understood all-too-well. They could look around and see powerful empires on every side: Assyria to the North, Egypt to the South, a rising power of Babylon to the East. They'd seen what these nations could do; they had watched as their relatives and neighbors, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been taken away into captivity in Assyria. *And* they had heard warnings from the Lord, as the Lord sent prophets to speak to them of the judgment that was coming for them also.

So, for the believers that were left in Judah—again, that is whom Isaiah is addressing here—for the believers in Judah who saw and recognized these things, fear was a common feeling. They were afraid! They were afraid for the long-term survival of their nation. They were afraid that maybe God was going to desert them, since they'd done such a poor job at being His people, after all. They may well have carried these fears in their hearts and just given up, throwing up their hands and saying, "What's the use in going on?! It's hopeless!" That's the result of paralyzing fear.

If we only trust what we can see—if we judge how our nation is doing, or more importantly how our church is doing based *only* on the visible evidence—then we're going to be afraid as well. And this fear can paralyze you. The temptation facing us is to become complacent, to give up, to think there's not really anything we can do anyway. The temptation facing us is to forego sharing God's Word, figuring no one would listen anyways. Or maybe the temptation is to forego speaking up about our faith, since in this social climate, it might very well come back to bite us. We might lose relationships.

The temptation is to give up hope—for the country, for the Christian Church, for Faith Lutheran

Church—imagining that the future of all these things is hopeless. . . as if God were not in control. These fears need to be driven away from our hearts. And so *that* is why God invites us to trust *not just* what our eyes see, but to look through the eyes of faith. To trust what He says. He gives us today this promise to hold onto: ***“Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you.”***

***“Vengeance”*** and ***“recompense.”*** Not very pretty words. But they both mean the same thing—*God is going to judge.* He’s coming back! But as He does this, it will be to save you. Look at that sentence. In one breath, “Vengeance. . . recompense. . . your salvation.” This is how God operates. Every time He comes in judgment, every time He pours out His wrath against sin, it is with the joint purpose of saving you. Because everything that God does even today, even the things that sound scary, He does it in order to work out salvation for you and me.

Think about the flood. God saw that the world was very evil. He decided it would be better to *destroy* His creation than allow it to continue along its evil path. He literally poured out His vengeance on the earth in the form of a deluge of water, but what did He do with that water at the *same time*? He saved! He saved eight individuals in an ark floating on the surface of the waters, all so that a Savior could still be born as promised, a Savior who would save.

And in that Savior we see, yet again, “Vengeance. . . recompense. . . and your salvation.” When Jesus went to the cross and carried with Himself your sins and mine, God used up all of His wrath and divine anger on Jesus. The Father *raged* against His Son, turned away from Him because He had become sin for us. All of the payment that was owed for the sins of the world was charged to Jesus, costing Him His life. *This* was vengeance. *This* was the God’s recompense; it was carried out in order to save you.

So, God tells us through Isaiah the prophet, ***“Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you.”*** In other words, you might look around, it might seem to you that things are getting worse. You may be afraid of what the future will bring. But God tells you there’s no *reason* to fear. He’s still in control. Vengeance still belongs to Him, He will repay. (cf. Romans 12:19) And through it all He will get you to haven. Everything God does today is for this purpose. This is God’s promise, and we can’t necessarily *see* it, not with our eyes, anyways. But He gives us this promise so that we can see it in faith and grasp it by faith.

And *then*, He gives us some visible evidence. ***“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert. The parched ground shall become a pool, And the thirsty land springs of water; In the habitation of jackals, where each lay, There shall be grass with reeds and rushes.”***

Can you think of anyone else from Scripture that was afraid based on what he could see with his eyes? I’m thinking of John the Baptist. In Matthew 11, we can read that John had been placed in prison. And you can imagine what that development was like for him. He knew what his mission had been: prepare the way for the Messiah. And he did so, preaching a baptism of repentance for forgiveness, preparing hearts for the Savior to arrive. And when Jesus stepped onto the scene, John identified Him! He cried out for all to hear, ***“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the***

**world!”** (John 1:29) And *then* John ends up in prison. Soon after, he’ll be killed as his head is removed from his shoulders. And seeing where this is all headed for himself, fear starts to set in. He sent his own disciples to Jesus to ask, **“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”** (Luke 7:19) Based on how things had been going—from what he could see with his eyes—it appeared that maybe he had made a mistake.

In His reply, Jesus hearkens back to our sermon text: **“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”** (Luke 7:22) By these visible miracles, Jesus showed John that He was indeed the Messiah, that He was the Son of God. By these visible miracles, Jesus showed that God *was* at work! He hadn’t abandoned Judah, and He hadn’t abandoned John either. No, even when John’s eyes couldn’t *see it for themselves*, God was working. *Today*, maybe we don’t see the blind recovering sight. Maybe we don’t hear about the deaf regaining their power of hearing. We don’t find those wheelchair-bound standing, walking, and leaping. But God is still at work, and He’s still doing these things.

We’ve spoken at length about the state of the church, the fears for the church moving forward. A lot of those fears have to do with church attendance decreasing nationwide; there’s no hiding that. Now, honestly, a big part of that trend is that it used to be beneficial and profitable to be a Christian. Back when *most* people went to church on Sundays, you were the oddity if you didn’t go. So, many people just went. *Now* everything is flipped; many people will look down on you and even hate you if you’re one of those church-going Christians. And yet, even now in 2024 America, when it seems harder than ever to be a member of the Holy Christian Church, Jesus is still opening the eyes of the blind, still causing the deaf to hear, still causing the mute to sing.

This happens every time a person dead in sin and unbelief hears the Word of God and believes. God is working *right now*; He has everything under control. And so He tells you, **Be Strong, and Do Not Fear.** So, is it a good time to be in the Church? Yes, absolutely! It’s a great time to be in the Church, even in this country at this time, because our trust lies not in what we see with our eyes, but in God’s promises—and those don’t change!

Now, I have to admit something here. I admit that I often *do* worry about the long-term survival of the United States. Just a couple days ago, I saw in passing a mention of the year 2100, and I thought, “2100, I’d be shocked if the world’s still around in 2100.” That seems so far off when you see 2-1-0-0. And then I realized, it’s not too farfetched to think that my sons would be alive in 2100, they’d be in their late 70’s and early 80’s. And boy, that thought scared me. I know the pressures on Christians in 2024, I know the hatred that the church feels today; I’ve known close friends who have fallen away. And the idea of how much worse it could be in 76 years is frightening. The United States’ national conscience has become blind and deaf and mute about what is right and wrong, because, as a nation, we bow before an altar of rights instead of bowing before the Lord. But even though everything we can see seems like it should cause us to worry and fear, we can still trust in Christ’s Word. That even in the turmoil of our world, God is present. He’s actively working to save, working for the salvation of those who trust in Him. So, there’s no need to fear, not today, not 76 years from now. Hear God’s encouragement: **“Be strong; do not fear!” “He will come and save you.”** Amen.