

Be Strong! Do Not Fear! Your King Comes!

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, 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. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 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." Then will 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. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. 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. 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. 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, 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.

As you know, we are using Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* for our Midweek Advent series. Whether you read it in the book or watch it in one of the two dozen or so movies made on it, you can't help but be inspired by Tiny Tim. Here is a child who was born crippled and either needs crutches or have dad carry him on his shoulders. Without proper medical attention he will die. When the Spirit of Christmas present took Scrooge to see the Cratchits celebrate Christmas, you have to like how positive Tiny Tim was. He talked about going to church on Christmas and how people stared at him. But he didn't mind. He said, "It might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see." That is inspiring.

Well, that is what your Lord wants to do for you in our reading from Isaiah. He knows it is tough for you. He knows we sometimes get tired waiting for Christ. So he encourages all of us with a vision of Christ coming strengthen us while we wait.

I. What does God promised about the Savior?

How does God describe to his Old Testament people what will happen when Christ comes? Like a parable he takes things familiar to them and uses them as a picture. ***"The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, 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. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 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." Then will 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. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. 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."***

Jesus will bring change. When he walks through the desert, flowers will shoot out of the dead, dry ground and the beige sand will instantly become green grass. The desert will become as marvelous as a majestic forest. Jesus will smile as he walks past a blind man, and the blind man will actually see it. Jesus will greet the deaf man, and the deaf man's ears will open and hear his voice. The lame, the cripples, those with broken legs will stand up and dance alongside of Jesus.

The Old Testament people understood that Christ will change things dramatically. So when John the Baptist pointed to Jesus as the Christ, they were excited. At the same time they were also disappointed. Why? The desert where John preached remained a desert; grass did not grow there. Jesus healed thousands, yet thousands remained lame, blind, deaf and lepers. People still died. The Romans still ruled with an iron fist. The church was still divided by factions. Where was the change?

Even John the Baptist was confused. Remember, John was special. He job was to prepare the world for the coming of Christ and he was doing that already when he was still in the womb of his mother and he leapt for joy when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, came into the room. When Christ appeared, he pointed to him and told the crowd that Jesus is the Lamb of God who will take the sins of the world.

There was change with the coming of Jesus, but not the change John expected. What changed was John was arrested and thrown into prison. He began to wonder if Jesus was the Christ. Don't come down too hard with John. He didn't lose faith. He still saw and believed that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah.

John's problem was he still had eyeballs and he saw and felt things didn't match up to these pictures of Christ. Have you struggled with the same? I remember a lady, Sherry, who had multiple health problems including polio and MS. She believed in God with child like faith. Yet, she admitted she read stories of Jesus making the lame walk and she prayed she could walk without crutches. She knew she would dance in heaven, but she wanted so much to dance here on earth. She admitted she was frustrated.

We all feel the same way. We read passages like Isaiah. We know Jesus can heal anyone. We come to God with our troubles and burdens. We pray to him. We come to Church. We come, and what does God do? He gives us a book and some promises.

He splashes a little water on our head and gives us a tiny bit of bread and wine. That's it. You don't want to admit that you are disappointed. But you find yourself wondering, too, like John. Is this for real? Is Jesus the Christ? Is any of this worth it? Learn from John. He felt the same way you do. And learn how God assured John up because he does the same with you.

II. Is fulfilled in Christ now and forever.

Learn from John. When he felt disappointment and confusion, he did the right thing. He went to Jesus. Well, he couldn't; he was locked in prison. But he sent his disciples to Jesus with one simple question: "Are you the Christ?" Jesus pointed John to the fact that blind people have had their sight restored, lame are walking, lepers are cured, deaf can hear, dead are alive again. Yes, Jesus pointed to his miracles and is now using those miracles to prove that this plain, average looking Jesus is the Christ and the Messiah.

But by raising the picture of Isaiah, Jesus also reminded John of another thing. The answer to John's question was already answered right there in God's Word. ***"Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 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."*** Guess what John? Guess what people of St. Paul's? The road to heaven is full of people who are crawling, weak, plagued by doubts, afraid, who are using crutches or being pushed in wheel chairs or carried on others' shoulders. We are all limping along on the road to heaven. We often don't see God's promises kept, not yet. We still suffer and groan. But keep limping because Christ is coming with vengeance.

What kind of vengeance? I remember in the gospel of John as Jesus attended the funeral for Lazarus. He saw Mary and Martha and dozens of other people completely distraught and crying. The text tells us that Jesus was disturbed. That is an understatement. It says he was furious. Jesus hates what sin and death does to us. So he demanded the stone be rolled away and that Lazarus walk out, and he did.

But Jesus' anger didn't end there. He went all the way to the cross to die for our sins and rise from the grave to destroy sin and death. And his anger still wasn't satisfied. He will come again to raise us from the dead and destroy death in the lake of fire. That's how Jesus will avenge you.

As a result, we have a way to heaven. ***"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. 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, 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."***

When we drive to Michigan to visit my sister and father, we drive through Illinois. You know how Illinois has toll roads, many of them. To make it easier, we bought an iPass so we don't have to stop at every tollbooth. But you still pay. Electronics read your iPass as you drive by and you get billed later. It costs us anywhere around \$15 to \$25 to drive through Illinois depending on which route we take. It is expensive.

The highway to heaven is like a toll road. It costs a lot to travel it. But here is the good news. Jesus paid the price. It is like the iPass, only the bill goes to Christ and not to us. He paid for it with his death on the cross. As a result this highway is full of the redeemed and ransomed, people Jesus bought with his innocent suffering and death. Not everyone is on it. The wicked don't travel it because they chose to remain wicked and not be redeemed by Christ. But we do.

And the road ends in everlasting joy. At the gates of heaven you will find a huge pile of crutches, caskets, wheelchairs, burdens and troubles. Maybe God chose not to take away your blindness or the weakness in your legs now, but he will in heaven.

Guess what? You are not worse than John. He, too, felt frustration and confusion. But Jesus pointed him to God's promises in his Word. He simply needed to hear again that Jesus is the Christ as promised in Isaiah. Suddenly, a book and some promises, a little water and some bread and wine means a lot to us. We just need to hear it again and again. Let this Christ and God's promises spur you along on that highway: ***"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."*** Amen.