

## + Isaiah 35:4-7a + That's Easy for You to Say! + 16th Sunday after Pentecost + 16 September 2012 +<sup>1</sup>

As a pastor, I get asked a lot of different questions from different people. "What does your church teach about...?" "What is your congregation like?" "What does Lutheran mean?" "What does God's Word say?" "Where's your church?" "Are you from around here?" "Is there any way your church can help?" Some answers come easy, while some questions are more challenging, and some I simply can't answer.

As a pastor, there are also questions I ask myself. "Did I remember to...?" "What text will I preach on this Sunday?" "Did I ask so-and-so...?" "How should I handle this situation?" Yet one of the most common questions that I ask myself is "What do I say?" What do you say to the man who just found out he's losing his job? What do you say to the parents whose son or daughter is ruining his or her life? What do you say to the person who doesn't want to deal with the guilt she's hidden for years? What do you say to the family whose dad is in ICU after a serious car accident? What do you say to the woman who just found out she has six months to live? What do you say to the couple whose marriage is falling apart? What do you say to the family who can barely make ends meet? What do you say when someone dies?

To be honest, "What do I say?" is a pretty common question for all of us. In such situations, it would be easy for you or me to say, "Hang in there. You'll be alright. Everything's going to be fine. Don't be afraid. Be strong." Now that sounds encouraging, but is it really? Is it any more encouraging than saying, "Well, hopefully things will get better, but really I can't be sure. So pick yourself up because you can handle this crisis." Coming from you or me, that kind of encouragement during a time of crisis or trouble can cause someone to quickly blurt out, "**THAT'S EASY FOR YOU TO SAY!**"

So what does God have to say to his beloved children during those difficult and often heartbreaking situations? He tells his Old Testament prophet Isaiah, **"...Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come...'"** Sounds an awful lot like that easy encouragement I mentioned before. **"Be strong, do not fear."** Before you start thinking that God's encouragement sounds so shallow that he has nothing to say to any one of us who is hurting, consider the promise he has attached to those words of encouragement, a promise that gives real, bottomless depth to his encouragement. **"Your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."**

Right before our text, the Lord allowed Isaiah to see a terrifying, gory vision of the judgment that was going to befall all nations. Such graphic detail could even terrify the believer, but God was going to come and deliver his people from those who oppose and reject him and his people, but when was God going to come? **"Those with fearful hearts..."** couldn't help, but ask that question, neither can those who are hurting and suffering today. When is God going to deliver me from suffering? From disease? From need? From worry? From persecution? From sorrow and grief? From guilt? When is God going to come through on his promise so all that encouragement to **"Be strong"** and **"Do not fear"** isn't just shallow talk?

What's God's answer? He doesn't tell us when he's going to come to carry out his **"divine retribution"** on the nations, but that doesn't make his promise any less real or its fulfillment any less possible. Yet our skeptical sinful minds cry out, "That's easy for you to say!"

God also does not promise to make this world free of pain or suffering or loss or want or grief. He does not promise to give someone his job back or heal every marriage or have everyone survive car accidents and cancer, but yet he still promises that **"he will come to save you"**. Again our skeptical sinful minds cry out, "That's easy for you to say!"

Why should you and I believe that God can do more than pat us on the back and tell us to **"Be strong"**? Look no further than Jesus. When God promised to **"come to save you"**, he actually did. God sent his Son Jesus (whose very name means "Savior") to bring hope and joy and confidence to **"fearful hearts"**, hearts anxious with worry and fear and sorrow and guilt, hearts blind and deaf and dead in sin, hearts like yours and mine.

By nature, you and I are blind to the fact that we need a Savior. All you see before your eyes is the next big problem or crisis. It looms large in front of you and seems to block out everything. It fills your heart with worry and fear, even as your sinful nature blindly gropes around from sin to sin. By nature, you and I are deaf to the good news God shares with us about Jesus in his Word. All you hear is judgment, and your natural skepticism drowns out all God so graciously promises. "That's easy for you to say!" In fact, our spiritual condition is even worse. Every single one of us is dead in sin, as dead as a dry desert of burning sand, dead to God and his love, dead and deserving of his eternal judgment.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the thoughts of this sermon were received with thanks from Pr. Nathan Berg.

It's no wonder our hearts are so **"fearful"**! Nevertheless, God still tell us exactly what each of us needs to hear. God says through Isaiah, **"...Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God...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."** God came to save you, just as he promised.

Are you dealing with loss or need? Jesus gave up everything to come to this earth to become your Savior. He was even willing to lose his life to give you life! Are you struggling with guilt? Jesus came to reconcile you to God not by prescribing another poor attempt to make up for your sins, but by taking your guilt on his own almighty shoulders and removing it forever by his own innocent suffering and death. If you're still not sure you're forgiven, look into the empty tomb he guaranteed and see how complete your forgiveness is.

Are you worried about a loved one who is struggling spiritually? Jesus came to save that loved one too, no matter what's going on in their life. He came to take your worry off your shoulders, and he's the only One who can heal that loved one spiritually as he works through his Word. Are you worried about what lies ahead for you or your family or a loved one? Jesus came to save you, and in so doing, he promised not only to be with you (and all his people) forever, but also to demonstrate that he himself is in control of all things, including life and death. Jesus had power over every aspect of his life, every aspect of his death, including his glorious resurrection and his exaltation to the right hand of the Father. He promises to work all things for the good of those who love him and to make all things new—even if that means making all things new in the glories of heaven. In all these cases, Jesus removes all skepticism about his promises, because in every case, Jesus comes to save.

During the early part of Jesus' ministry, his cousin John the Baptizer was imprisoned for condemning the lurid sins of King Herod. While in prison, John's sinful nature started to get the best of him. Here was the man sent by God to point out Jesus as **"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29). Here was the man who had baptized Jesus, anointing him to begin his public ministry and then seeing how the God the Father and God the Holy Spirit approved of Jesus as our Savior. Still in prison, John's sinful nature raised skeptical doubts in his mind. He even sent some of his followers to ask Jesus, **"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"** (Matthew 11:3) So what was Jesus going to say? "Don't worry. Everything will get better. Why ask such a silly question?"

No, Jesus sent the following message back. **"Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."** (Matthew 11:4-6) Sound familiar? Jesus pointed back to Isaiah's prophecy to prove that God had certainly come to earth to save. Yes, Jesus had actually been healing the blind and lame and leprous and deaf, raising the dead, and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom, but Jesus didn't give sight to all the blind or heal all the lame or leprous or deaf or mute. He didn't raise all the dead, and not everyone listened to his message. In fact, many rejected it, but what Jesus had to say was exactly what John needed to hear. John knew his Old Testament and he knew Isaiah's prophecy. He knew that in Jesus, God had come to save him. When it was time for John to die, he knew he could die in peace with confidence in Jesus who came to bring eternal life to dead hearts like his.

So what about you? If you're struggling with guilt or sickness or loss, if you're dealing with grief or want or fear or worry, what does God have to say to you? **"Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come...he will come to save you.'"** Your Savior has come. He did live. He did die. He did rise again, and he now rules all things in this universe for your good. He gave you sight for your blindness and hearing for your deafness. He causes you to **"leap like a deer"** with joy and fills your mouth with **"shouts of joy"** even in the midst of earthly suffering and sorrow. Even if he allows you to suffer now, he has guaranteed that he will one day deliver you from this vale of tears to himself in heaven. With that, he gives you the kind of confidence that can say with Martin Luther, **"Though all devils were rolled into one, my God is greater"** (Luther's Works, Vol. 16:301). Our God most certainly is, because he came to save you and me as he promised.

Yes, that sounds like easy encouragement, but what else can you say that actually brings healing to the suffering, forgiveness to the guilty, confidence to the fearful, strength to the weary, and life to the dead? So, my dear friends, **"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come...he will come to save you."** In your Savior Jesus, he most certainly has and most certainly will. There's no better comfort, no better encouragement than that. Amen.