

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.”*

⁵ *Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.*

⁶ *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.*

⁷ *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. (Isaiah 35:4-7)*

Jesus Came to Set Us Free!

Are you free? I think that most of us would say “yes.” Freedom is one of the most treasured benefits of being an American. But what does freedom mean? The founders of our country thought of it as being allowed to make choices. We can belong to whatever church we like, we can vote for anybody we want to, we can say almost anything without being punished for it. But there’s another kind of freedom. Not freedom to do something, but freedom from something. This kind of freedom is much harder to give to an entire society. How many Americans are free from poverty? What about freedom from suffering? What about freedom from sadness and pain? No constitution can give us those rights. Pain and sorrow touch every life in this world.

They even touched Jesus’ life. If anybody ever had the power to free himself from pain and sorrow, it was Jesus. He was the Son of God. But not once do we see Jesus use his power to make his own life easier. That’s because he didn’t come here to take it easy. He came here with a mission. That mission included suffering all the hurts and sorrows we face every day of our lives. Jesus came to live as one of us because **Jesus came to set us free!**

I.

Jesus did give us freedom to choose how we live, within the framework of God’s law. But the word of God that we have before us this morning from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah points to the other kind of freedom. **Jesus came to set us free from all the sufferings of this life.**

He can do that because he knows all that has happened and all that will happen. We don’t even know all that has happened. History – even recent history – is full of unanswered questions. Last week, the FBI started digging up an abandoned lumber yard in Detroit and immediately people started asking if they were looking for Jimmy Hoffa. They asked that because we still don’t know what happened to him and we may never know. But God does. God knows everything that has ever happened. And God knows everything that will ever happen. That’s hard for us to wrap our minds around. But it’s true.

The words we’re considering this morning show God’s foreknowledge. Isaiah wrote these words 700 years before Jesus was born, so 2700 years ago. They spoke of the future. Isaiah said that God would come to save you. He continued, **“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 ...”** What do those words sound like to you? I don’t think anybody who knows the story of Jesus can help but think of his miracles. The gospels tell us that Jesus healed at least five specific individuals who were blind, two who were deaf, two more who were paralyzed and three who couldn’t speak. But then there are numerous general statements that the people brought the blind and deaf and the mute and lame to Jesus and he healed them. He healed so many people that God didn’t even bother to record all the details. He just gave us a sampling of them to show us that God came

to save us. Jesus was more than just another great teacher, more than just a charismatic speaker. Every miracle he did was proof that God came to this earth just as he told Isaiah 700 years before our Lord was born.

But the promises didn't stop on the day Jesus ascended into heaven. Isaiah said, **“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.”** What does all this mean? Water flowing in the desert. My parents live on the edge of the desert in California. One year when we visited them, we went to Joshua Tree National Park and took the driving tour. Every so often, we would stop and walk up the trails to see rock formations or petroglyphs. And let me tell you, I had a little nagging anxiety. It was over a hundred degrees outside and some of the trails were a mile or more and we were walking with our kids. They didn't understand why I kept dumping water on their heads. I wasn't doing it to tease them – I wanted to keep them cool. The desert is deadly if you're unprepared.

So was God promising literal waters in the desert here? He repeats this promise more than once in the Old Testament and some people think these promises looked forward to a millennial age when the nation of Israel would cultivate the desert and make it bloom. But that's not what God is talking about here. He's talking about the water of life. Jesus made clear that he is the water of life. Scientists will tell you that deserts are not dead. They're actually full of life. Our Creator God designed all manner of plants and animals to live in the desert. Our text mentions jackals, and they have to feed on something. But for us, the desert seems to hold no life. God was using that harsh desert climate as a figure for the world without faith in him. It is harsh and dead. The world is haunt for jackals – for spiritual scavengers who feed on people who are dead in their trespasses and sins and don't even know how far they are from God.

But Jesus came to rescue us. He came to set us free from spiritual death. He died and he rose to give us life. The waters flowing in the desert represent the water of life, the gospel flowing in this desert world to give life to God's people. That helps us to see how Jesus still applies healing to us, too. God never promised that we would be spared from sickness. There are blind Christians today. There are deaf and mute and paralyzed Christians today. Even though modern medicine would seem almost miraculous to people of Jesus' time, I still have to visit people in the hospital almost every month. For as long as this world lasts in this sinful condition, that's the way it's going to be. Sin causes suffering. You and I are going to suffer. Not all of us every day. But some of us all the time. Some days, maybe even most of us.

God cares about our suffering. God the Son came into this world in the stable of Bethlehem to set us free from all that suffering. Every time Jesus healed someone and showed that he was God, he was showing us that he was the solution to our suffering. Two thousand years later, that's still true. The Savior who died to give us eternal life is the Savior who watches over us in this life. He promised that when he lets suffering come to us, he will use it for our good. Sometimes, that means that he uses one kind of suffering to spare us another kind. I've served Christians who went to the hospital because of some pain that turned out to be something very minor. But while they were checking it, they found something major – and they found it in time to help that person. That's God taking care of us.

But there's another sense in which God cares for us in suffering. Jesus told us that if we want to follow him, we have to carry our cross. The cross is suffering which challenges our faith. If you have faith, you will have the cross. In a sinful world, it's not possible to trust in Jesus without facing challenges. Our God controls which challenges come. He decides how many and how severe they will be. But we do have to face suffering because Jesus uses hardship to burn the impurities out of our faith. He uses suffering to teach us to trust in him because nothing else in this life can rescue us.

Then when we suffer, he comes to us in the gospel and he promises that he will rescue us from all harm and suffering. Many times I've prayed with people in the hospital and God has given us exactly what we asked for: healing and life. But other times, he hasn't. He let the person suffer more and more. Sometimes, he used the suffering to end that Christian's life here. So does that mean he didn't keep his promise? Not at all. This promise is only fully kept in heaven. Only when we see Jesus face to face will we be totally free from suffering.

That happens at the moment we die. But in a greater sense, it happens when we rise again. When Jesus returns, every Christian will live. Christians who were blind and deaf and mute and paralyzed all their lives will see and hear and sing and leap like deer. Christians who were elderly and unable to walk, Christians who were cancer stricken and full of pain, Christians who were lost and confused and lonely – all of them will have

perfect bodies and perfect hearts. We will all live in perfect joy forever – all because God came and took human flesh and lived and died and rose to set us free.

II.

Everything that hurts you now will end. And you will have a better life. You will live forever with Christ. For every second of pain here, we will have endless thousands of years of joy in the world to come. That's the promise God gives us when we suffer in this life. It isn't the kind of thing we say to small children when they're hurt or disappointed, "It'll be better tomorrow." It isn't the kind of thing that we adults mumble to each other: "I'm sorry for your loss." "It's all going to be OK, you'll see." Does that ever really help? I think we know it doesn't and we hate to say it, but we don't know what else to say. God's comfort is better because God has built power to help us into his comfort. **Jesus came to set us free from the fear in our hearts.**

People often share their hurts with me. They call me to the bedside of their dying loved ones. They talk to me about their disappointments and their hurts. That's part of what a pastor is for. Sometimes, I feel helpless. How can I make you feel better? I can't make you feel better. I can't cure the hurt in your heart. I can't take away the physical pain in your body. I cannot heal your soul. But I can provide care for your soul. It's my job to provide spiritual medicine. But it's God's job to work through that medicine and heal you. It's God's job to calm your troubled heart, to give you comfort and courage in dark days.

God said to Isaiah, **"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.'**" How often don't our hearts tremble? If you ever have surgery scheduled, call me and I will come to the hospital after you check in and pray with you and remind of God's promises. Do you know why? Because that's really scary. On days like that, I've sat with Christians who are examples of faith to the rest of us. Almost always when I ask them, "Are you nervous?" The answer is yes. Sometimes, it's just a little bit. Sometimes, it's a full blown anxiety attack. But waiting there for a surgeon to come and cut you open is scary.

There are many situations in life in which our hearts tremble. We worry about work and our children and our loved ones who are far away and perhaps in danger. We anticipate pain and sadness. We face conflict or the need to comfort people we love and on the way to those meetings, how do we feel? Scared. Anxious. Twisted up in our guts.

At that those moments, God says, "Be strong. Do not fear. I will come for you." God promised to come with vengeance and with divine retribution. He was talking about Judgment Day. He was promising to come and set everything right. He will come with vengeance against the devil who's been tormenting us since the day we were born. He will come and undo all the hurt we've suffered here. On that day, we will be free.

That promise gives us courage today. Jesus is coming to set you free. God built into that promise the power to heal you. He cares for your heart when he sends me to speak his words. God wanted us to know that's how he cares for us. Because he didn't just look forward from Isaiah's time and see Jesus' coming in Bethlehem. He didn't just look forward and see Jesus' return. God knows everything. 2700 years ago, he knew you. He knew your life and your sufferings and he loved you already then. He promised to send his Son to die and rise to set you free. He promised to give you the message of the gospel which is the greatest power in the universe to free your heart from fear while you wait for him. He promised that Jesus will come back and take away everything that sin has done to us. Trust in that promise. Jesus gives it to you. Amen.