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Pentecost XVI & Proper 18
Isaiah 35:4 – 7a
September 8, 2024
Title: More To Come

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Today's sermon text is taken from the book of the prophet, Isaiah. This book is filled with rich references to the Christ, and the promise of salvation for God's people, even as it warns of God's Judgment for them. Just prior to today's reading from chapter 35, Isaiah proclaims the Lord's wrath against all nations, "For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; He has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree."

But here in this chapter, the Lord's Word changes. In the beginning of today's reading, He encourages His people with the words "Be strong!" and "Do not fear!" Isaiah is talking to the people of Israel who will be in exile when Jerusalem eventually falls. They will be given a chance to return to their home after a time, but their faith must endure through many trials. Until that time they are weak and fearful in their faith, just like we are.

We don't like to admit this reality, but ultimately our faith is weak and we are easily filled with fear in times of trial. Our devotion and faith is so easily distracted by the world around us. Go to church every weekend? Sure, I can do that, but you know, Sunday is my *only* day to sleep in and it's so hard to get the kids ready. I can make it as long as nothing more important comes along, like I get tickets to a Packers game or I get company from out of town.

We're experts at coming up with reasons that we can't regularly worship or study God's Word together, especially at certain times of the year, but we neglect our faith in the process. Your faith needs

to be nurtured and strengthened by regularly reading, hearing, and studying God's Word, and it needs to receive the blessings of the Sacrament frequently in order to be fed by the body and blood of Christ. Without regular exposure to Word and Sacrament, your faith gets weak and can even die off. We need to think of feeding our faith in the same way that we feed our bodies. If we don't eat regularly and healthily, we get weak and sick, and the same principle applies to our faith.

A weak faith will result in fear and worry in the face of trouble. We worry because we forget to rely on God. We try to face problems on our own. We rely on our own plans and strength to get us through. At least, we do that until we realize that we are in way over our heads, and it's only then that we remember that God is our refuge and strength.

The rest of verse 4 tells us why we have no need to fear. Our God is coming with vengeance. Now for those who do not believe in Him, that is a terrifying thing! God is coming with vengeance! But for those who are His people, there is nothing to fear because He is coming to take vengeance on our enemies, and to save us from our sins and from those who tempt us.

Now, of course, God has already saved us from our sins. He did that when Jesus died on the cross for them, and then rose in His victory over death. In doing that He came and saved us, just as Isaiah said He would, but His vengeance over our enemies has not fully been accomplished yet. He is still waiting for that day when He will send His Son again. The day when He will judge what the Creeds call the "living and the dead." The day when He will make all things new, and grant eternal life to all who are alive in faith in Christ Jesus.

In the next two verses Isaiah describes what will happen to the blind, deaf, lame and mute. So why should I care about that? I'm not blind or lame. I'm certainly not mute or completely deaf, and neither are many of us here today. Sure, some of us have our physical challenges to one degree or another, but it's nothing that we can't live with. Or is it?

Just like many things in the prophets, Isaiah is speaking figuratively at the same time that he is speaking literally. The blind, deaf, lame and mute that he is talking about are really unable to see, hear, walk and talk. But He is also talking to the spiritually blind, deaf, lame and mute, and that means that He is talking about all of us as well.

We are spiritually blind when we don't let ourselves see the God pleasing choice that is before us, and we make a different choice instead. Perhaps we neglect the poor among us, or we ignore a need from our neighbor. Maybe we avoid a friend who needs our help because we just don't want to take the time, or we're afraid of being uncomfortable because we don't know what to say about their problems. At these times we are living a life that is spiritually blind.

We are spiritually deaf whenever we ignore what the word of God tells us, or we simply don't take the time to let it be spoken to us. When we give into a temptation to avoid coming to worship and Bible Study we turn a deaf ear to the voice of God being spoken to us. He gently speaks his Word to us, and we are deaf to Him when we let the voices of work, nature, family or simply the world in general drown out what He is saying to us. We follow those other voices, and we fail to hear the persistent, loving, still, small voice of our Lord God.

Being spiritually lame describes us perfectly when we fail to do the good works that we are called to do as His people. Today's epistle reading from James tells us this truth. James writes, "What good is it...if someone says he has faith but does not have works?...If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead...Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

Spiritual muteness is something that we afflict ourselves with most often in today's world. This is what happens when we are given the chance to talk with someone else – even our own family or fellow members here at church – about Jesus as the Son of God, and we just don't do it. Maybe we're unsure of ourselves. Maybe we don't want to say something when we don't have all the answers, or we're afraid that we'll say something wrong. Maybe we are afraid of standing out and being labeled as judgmental or bigoted. Regardless of why we fail, the fact is that we ignore Jesus' command to spread His Word to all nations.

Our faith in Jesus saves us in all things though, and it does from these spiritual afflictions as well. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus Himself heals a deaf man who can "hardly speak." When He is healed, the man is immediately able to hear and to speak plainly. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy with the healings that He did. He made the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf able to hear and the mute to speak, but He did far more than that for the spiritual lives of His people.

Through our faith in Him we are forgiven for all of our sinful failings. He forgives each and everything that we don't do and should or the things that we do and shouldn't. Then He gives us the strength through faith to stand for Him when we are called to. He gives us the ability to see our neighbor's needs and hurts, and to give them the love and care that they need. He opens our spiritual eyes to them just as He opened the eyes of the blind. He opens our ears to the Words that He has for us, and He helps us to hear Him through all of the other voices that normally would drown Him out. We become more able to discern His voice through all of the noise as we become more in tune with God's Will and Word through prayer and study. He heals our lameness by sending others to encourage us to step out of our comfort zone and do the good works that He prepared in advance for us to do. Finally, he loosens our tongue by giving us the desire to see all of our family, friends and neighbors come to faith in Jesus Christ rather than be condemned to hell. Because of love for our neighbor, which comes

from our faith in Christ, we share our faith in Him spreading it to others so that they too can know His love.

The coming of Jesus fulfilled these words of Isaiah's prophecy a second time, and in a more complete way. It was fulfilled once when the exiles returned from Babylon to live once again in the Promised Land. But the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf remained closed until this prophecy was fulfilled even more completely by the life and work of Jesus. The healing miracles that we read about in each of the Gospels, including today's reading from Mark 7, clearly show us that He fulfills Isaiah's words. But as complete as the prophecy is in Jesus, it is still not finished in its fullness.

In the end of the reading we are promised that rivers will break forth in the desert, and parched ground will produce springs of water. We still have deserts. There are still blind and deaf and lame and mute people in the world, even among those who are faithful to Christ. This prophecy was fulfilled with Jesus' first coming, but there is greater fulfillment to come. He has promised that He will come again!

At that time, we will see the fulfillment of this prophecy and of every other prophecy from God in an even more complete way! He has given us Living Water in baptism, but when He returns that water will overflow wherever it is needed. In Holy Communion He has given us a taste of the feast that awaits us, but when He returns we will have more than we could ever desire. He has shown a hint of His healing power, but when He comes again there will be no more pain; no more suffering; no more death. And until the time that He comes again, we have His words of promise from Isaiah, "Be strong! Do not fear! Behold! Your God will come in with vengeance...and save you!" Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.