

Hope for Fearful Hearts

Isaiah 35:4-7

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Prayer for illumination:

Gracious and Holy God,
Give us the wisdom to discover You;
Give us the diligence to seek after You;
Give us the patience to wait for You;
Give us eyes to behold you;
Give us hearts to meditate upon You;
Give us lives to proclaim You
Through the power of the Spirit of Jesus, our Lord. *Amen.*

Isaiah 35:4-7

4 *Say to those who are of a fearful heart,*

“Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

*He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.*

He will come and save you.”

5 *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;*

6 *then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*

7 *the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God, your God who will come and save you.

Be strong, do not fear!

As we have gathered here for worship this morning, I ask that we sit with these words for a moment.

In this passage, God speaks through the prophet. God speaks to those with fearful hearts. In fact, one commentary translates this as “those whose hearts are racing”.

When has your heart raced?

Mine did, a week or so ago – it was an unusual thing. You see, my husband, Stephen, and I got married at the end of May and, at the end of June, we moved about 25 minutes southeast of here to the border of two large metropolises – Julian and Liberty. He is the pastor of two small Methodist churches and we live in the church parsonage – a quaint homey place in the midst of rolling fields. Now, I grew up in Columbia, SC, suburbs, quarter to half acre lots, always with many neighbors around. I just moved from Durham where I lived with 8 others in my house, a favorite past time was walking around the block, chatting with folks on their porches. Stephen and I are learning some things about rural life. Our first house guests a week in were, yes, mice. My heart raced as *he* checked traps each morning. Our next guest, a chicken that wandered into our yard and died. Right by the front door. During church one morning. My breath was held and my heart raced as we carefully took care of that one. Last week, as I checked laundry on the line, I heard galloping. As I turned, there was a white horse, speckled with brown, wildly running through our neighbors' field and into our yard. We made eye contact. I slowly walked toward it – the only way into the house – and my heart raced, as it's likely did as well as it went straight for the clothesline of neatly hung sheets.

Each of us comes this morning with different things on our hearts: different worries, different questions, different stories. We cry out to God. We wait in silence. Our hearts race. It might have been just this morning or this past week, maybe while hanging laundry? It might have been as you read through the news, hearts hurting for those in danger, for those fleeing for their lives - from violence, from political takeovers, from flooding and other natural disasters. Our hearts race as we hear of another school shooting, too close to home. Our hearts race as we wait, for a diagnosis, for news from a loved one or about a loved one, hard news. They race as we await the unknown.

Our hearts race. Surely the people of Israel had fearful and racing hearts. As we step into our passage this morning, the people are in exile. They are the oppressed people, distant from their homes and from their places of worship and tradition.

And they are going to return home. They are waiting. They are preparing. You see, this passage is, of course, held amidst other passages. If we were to skip back to early chapters in Isaiah the people of Israel have strayed. The people are told they will have to leave their land, their cities will be destroyed, years will pass, and only a few, a sacred remnant, will remain. They are told they will be unable to see God's work, their eyes will be closed to God, their ears will be stopped up, they will be stuck.

Yet, they are also told that those few, that remnant, will return to Israel. And, from that remnant there a shoot will spring forth from the stump. They are told they first must be cut down, but, new life will spring forth. As one professor puts it, the Israelites' lives were categorized by infidelity to God, by practices of injustice, by idolatry, and by invasion by neighbors. They had strayed from God. And, yet, through their exile, through the years, the remnant that remained turned to God, learning to be faithful. The exile was hard, but the people trusted that God was with them, they trusted that God was in control. And, God was with them, God was in control.

They are now preparing to return. This return has been foretold, but years have passed, years in a foreign land. They wait. Their hearts race.

Now, it is safe to say we have learned a bit about waiting in this period. As Jill preached last week, she referenced that distant place - June. As we reflect on those distant places, and as we sit in the here and now, as we worship this morning, we wait. And, we listen.

Into the fearful hearts of the people of Israel, God speaks hope. God speaks renewal, restoration of all.

“Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God, your God who will come and save you.”

Now, as God speaks through the prophet, these are not merely words against fear. But God offers a vision. The people must see it; they must dare to imagine an alternative reality. The invasion of the land will reverse to repopulation, the peoples’ idolatry will turn to re-creation, the injustice that existed will be righteousness, and the infidelity to God will become a renewed relationship.

God does come. God saves the people and returns them to Israel, to their homeplace. God gives new and abundant life, the people are reconciled to God. All is re-created, all is made new, all is restored. The imagery here is rich. It is dynamic. It invokes awe and wonder. All is made new.

The eyes of those who are blind shall be opened and the ears unstopped, those who are stuck shall leap, and all shall sing. Have you been to a desert or seen photos of one?... Now imagine streams rushing through. What about the wilderness – have you ever been on a hike that lasted a little too long? Your water bottle is empty, your spirit is slumping, you’re anxiously looking for the next mile marker, and it is hot...Now imagine waters breaking forth. How about the beach? Have you walked barefoot – it’s nice in the morning, but by mid-day, you find yourself running, wishing you could fly, touching the scalding sand as little as possible...Now, the burning sands shall become a pool. And the thirsty ground – imagine the sun broiling and ground cracked...now springs of water come forth! The destruction that had been foretold for their city is now, after years away, to be restored, to be re-created. The distance from God is to be reversed as the people are called to a new way of faithfulness. All is to be made whole again – all peoples reconciled, all life bursting forth anew.

In the midst of exile God gives a vision.

Perhaps the words of the prophet, perhaps this vision, is one that speaks to us, right where we are. It speaks to those whose hearts are racing. It speaks to those who are waiting, waiting in fear, and waiting in hope.

Not only does God give a vision, but as Christians we believe that, generations later, God comes in an entirely new way. Through Christ, who is the lamb who takes away the sins of the world, all are returned to God, giving new and abundant life as all, through Christ, are reconciled to God. Through Christ, all are freed and there is a restoration of justice. Through Christ, the vision of new and abundant life is fulfilled.

The world has been made new. We may only see glimpses of it now, as a gardener awaiting seedlings, as we sit in the now and not yet. But, as people of faith, we are called to look to the future, our hearts spoken to by God’s words, our hearts filled with hope – eternal hope.

The question arises, how do we respond?

Perhaps we are to respond in praise, as Psalm 146 this morning declares. Praising God all our life long.

Perhaps, as the prayer for illumination pointed to, we seek to behold God – all around us – in the beauty of the blooming zinnias or oranges of the summer sunsets, in the kindness of a neighbor who brings abundant tomatoes and cucumbers, or in rich music, filling this place.

Perhaps we are called to live differently, to sit in silence and meditate upon God, upon the Word made flesh, upon the vision of life and life abundant given through Christ. We are called to proclaim this message of hope with our lives. Not leaning on our own strength or ability but seeking to allow the Spirit to work in and through us.

Perhaps we are to respond to this message of hope, of re-creation and of new life with a renewed hope for justice and reconciliation. To turn to the One who shall reign throughout all generations, seeking to love and share Christ's love – amongst all.

And so, as we gather this morning, as our hearts might be racing or as we come, seeking God's Presence, we are given these words of hope. We are given this vision of life and life abundant. We are given a vision of all being made new: maybe it looks like all people gathering around one table – people from all nations and languages, all political beliefs, all socio-economic backgrounds – all gathered, all sharing in the one loaf and one cup. All has been made new. And we sit in the now and not yet of the kingdom. Christ has come, the salvation for the world, and we are called to turn. We are called to pray, to listen, to seek to behold the Spirit's working around us. And we are called to act. We are called to live differently – to live in joyful response to the gift of abundant life given – seeking justice and righteousness, living into the right-relationship with God given through Christ. Let us go, let us draw near to our Creator and Savior, and let us live differently – let us live in bold response to the hope that we are given in Christ, eternal hope.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.