

Isaiah 35

- Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
- 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
Requital is coming,
The recompense of God—
He will come and save you.”
- 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...
- A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
- 9 No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
- 10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Every Christmas Eve is very special. But this one, right now, is the most serious one I have ever faced in my life. I think it is also the most difficult and challenging one any of us have faced in our entire lives, regardless of age. With that in mind, I am really hoping to say something that will be helpful because we could sure use it. And that includes me and my family. So I am going to try.

I cannot just go with traditional things that are often said. Cliches and the same old story might not be as helpful as during more normal times. I have been quietly preparing for this night since the first Sunday in Advent. I didn't know how it was all going to come together, but we will briefly look back at the 4 Sundays that have brought us to this place, and interestingly, it brings us words from Isaiah, one more time. I am hoping that this place will be a place of *Confident Hope, For the Way*. I love that word confident. Like most people, I have heard that word most of my life. The other day I looked at it with new eyes, and I smiled. Confident is made of two great Latin words, and it means "with faith, with trust." It is my hope that tonight when we are finished, *Confident Hope For the Way* will have been more deeply instilled in all of us, because we need it. Let's also remember that we are people of **The Way**, and we are needing to walk this Way right now, because it is our turn in this world.

In honor of the First Sunday of Advent, we need to remember about how it is always our turn to walk the Way, right now, the Way in time and history that is ours. We cannot possess it, and really we are forced to walk it. There was a quote on that First Sunday, "We walk a way that began long before we walked it..." And we learned that day that we cannot just act like it is fine for us to keep saying what others said in the past. The discussion on the way always changes, because the world changes. As we walk and talk, we need to figure things out. We need to figure out how to live together, how to work together, how to thrive together. We must recognize that our world is different than it was 100 years ago, or 500 years ago. We can't just go back and look at what other people said. They lived in

a different world. They didn't see our part of the trail. But we see it now. Since the last 100 years, our world has seen terrible changes. A Great Depression, 2 world wars, an expensive cold war, genocide a few times, and now ecological crisis. And now we are in a pandemic that is showing all the weak spots in this world that has been built around us. We have seen terrible things. How does our faith speak today, in light of all the changes that have come? Frankly, a lot of people think that the Church has very little to say.

On that First Sunday, Isaiah promised us something special... ***"In the days to come..."*** In the days to come, we will be instructed in God's ways, so that we may walk His Path, or his Way. *In the days to come...* Isaiah suggests to us that there can be no better place to do this walking than God's Path, God's Way. We are told about it again tonight.

On the Second Sunday, when we had Communion, again in Isaiah, chapter 25, we heard these words: ***"On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich foods..."*** God will provide, and all the tears of life will be wiped away, and death itself will vanish as well. That is needed news today. We have bigger food lines in America than we have seen since the Depression. This disease has revealed all the cracks and weak spots in the world we know. How many small businesses have closed up for good? Homes are being lost. And yet, according to USA Today and stats from Forbes, the 614 American billionaires have made a total of almost \$1 trillion since the lockdown in March. Surely human society can do better than this. It is no wonder that Hollywood gives us so many dystopian, dark movies about the future! I think we can use some real hope.

On the Third Sunday we learned about the Wise Men, or Three Kings of Orient. Once again, there was a promise for them. The God of Israel, the God of Creation, was opening a special door to most of the world, a world that was without hope and without God in the world. The promise was that a new Way would appear, through which came our Gentile ancestors. We who were living in darkness were now included in walking God's Way.

And last Sunday, the Fourth Advent Sunday, we went to where Christmas really lives, in Luke's Gospel, where we see so many promises. Just like the promises made to Abraham, to his family, to Moses, to Hannah, to the people of Israel, new promises were made to Zechariah, to Elizabeth, to Mary, and then later to the Disciples, and ultimately to the Church, the people of "The Way," as they were called. And people had to wait. Just like in the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, "Behold, the days are coming..." The days will come.

I love this passage for tonight. I used it once for Christmas Eve, many years ago when our children were young and we lived in the flat dairy farmland south of Oberlin, Ohio. The words were great then. And just like good things that we have to wait for, we see these words tonight, as churches are closed, and people are trying to stay safe at home. These are great words of promise. Chapter 35 is the closing of the first big part of Isaiah. New parts, written hundreds of years later will kick in further down the Way. But once more, Isaiah gives us promises of a different world that is to come. Let's take another look:

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,

but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
9 No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isn't it amazing that when we look closely we see all this talk about "Derek Haqodesh," the Holy Way, the road that God has prepared, where God's people will walk? *A highway will be there... but it shall be for God's people.* Nothing bad will be one this road, no lions, no robbers. Even someone who is not too bright will not get lost! But the redeemed shall walk there. Again, we find a promise for the future. This is one of my biggest concerns about how Americans do Christmas. We do not have enough talk about God's promises of the future. We seem to think the world has all that it needs, and that everything is fine! Let's just open presents, and then clean up the mess that follows. Friends, our broken world needs more.

Where is the Confident Hope? I love how Isaiah of Jerusalem words this poem. Yes, he says wonderful things about Derek Haqodesh. But before talking about the joys, he has other news:

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees... It would seem that we have a lot of weak hands and feeble knees these days.

There are a lot of people with fearful hearts. That makes sense. It is likely that the virus will hit us the hardest in the next 3 months. Thank God for the vaccines that are being produced and dispensed. But this year, for Christmas, one of the best gifts we can give to others is Confident Hope. We need to tell people about our hopes. Because without hope, we will be in a world of trouble.

For whatever it might be worth, we need to be in the Hope business tonight. We need to respond to the world as it is all around us. It is a different world than it was 100 years ago. It is our turn to keep walking on the Way, Derek Haqodesh, the Way of Holiness, God's path. And we need to talk, and we need to think, and we need to solve problems, and we need to find better ways for us all to share life in this world. We need to strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. We need to share this Confident Hope, hope that we approach with faith. That is the only way it works. Will we share this hope, as we walk through life, taking our turn? Will we say something that will actually give hope to others? That is our calling. May God bless and keep us, and all the world, here on this Christmas Eve. AMEN.