

Isaiah 35:4-7a 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.

Be strong; do not fear

1. God comes with vengeance to save
2. The gospel changes life

“It’s a war out there,” Sergeant Smally said, “so be careful!” Frank Billings barely heard him. He was deep in his own thoughts. It was his first day back after the incident.

Incident sounded so insignificant. In reality, it was the most important *incident* of Frank’s 28 years on the force. For almost three decades, he had stared danger in the face without so much as blinking. Then came the *incident*.

It had been a routine domestic disturbance call – a husband getting violent with his wife. Frank handled dozens of cases like it. This time, however, as he and his partner were subduing the man, he came up with a pistol and fired four shots before Frank could wrestle it from his hand. Frank had felt one bullet whiz past his ear.

It wasn’t until after he had secured the man that he realized his partner, Ozzie, had taken a bullet. It was only a flesh wound, but it was enough to put Ozzie out for a couple of weeks. It had really scared Frank. Forty-eight years old and only two years away from retirement, Frank was confronted with his own mortality. Now, on his first day back after 30 days on administrative leave, Frank wasn’t sure he could handle the fear. It was a war out there. (Jacob Preus, Just Words, p. 189-190)

Because we live in a sinful, evil world, there is a lot for us to fear. But God tells us in this section from Isaiah the prophet, “Be strong; do not fear.”

Say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear. The word for fearful really has the idea of being hurried. What is it that quickens your heartbeat? What is it that stresses you out? What makes you feel like you can’t relax?

Is it this: *your God will come, he will come with vengeance*. “He’s coming!” Do these words strike fear in your heart, or do they warm your heart? It depends on the situation, doesn’t it? If you’re drawing a funny picture of your teacher on the white board before class, a classmate’s cry: “He’s coming!” should set your heart a-thumping as you sprint for your chair. On the other hand, if you are standing outside in the rain after school waiting for your dad to pick you up, “He’s coming!” are welcome words of relief.

“*Your God will come*” can be terrifying. We live in a much more dangerous world than we realize. “We are not simply at war with ourselves, we are at war with God. We are in danger not only from our fellow human beings, but we are in danger of God’s righteous judgment. There is no safe place for sinners. ‘If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?’ (Psalm 130:3)” (Preus, p. 193)

But that’s not why God is coming. *With divine retribution he will come to save you*. Salvation is used in the context of danger, warfare and chaos. To save a person is to rescue him or her from threatening circumstances. The psalmist exclaimed, “Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.” (Psalm 98:1) The picture is quite graphic: God reaches out his strong arm and snatches us from the precipice. He pulls us back from the brink of disaster and saves us.

“Through the waters of Baptism, God saves us from chaos, danger, and death. He snatches us from the precipice, brings us back from the brink of disaster, calls us by name, delivers us from certain destruction, and carries us into the loving and save arms of our Deliverer. We still may encounter danger in our lives, and we may face many fears” (Preus, p. 194), but we can say with Isaiah “*Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.*”

But it’s hard to be strong sometimes. Life can be like a desert, dried up and dying. After the death of a husband, or a child. Or a marriage slowly dries up and becomes like a desert. Cancer or other serious diseases can dry up a person’s zest for life.

Life can be like a desert, when God seems to be very far away. When love seems so very far away. When the marriage is dead. When the husband is dead. When mom is dead. When the energies have died. Life can become like a desert.

Our old Adam tells us life is half empty. God has not blessed us as he has blessed others. God doesn't love us. No one does. It's a barren desert all around.

Our enemies are fierce and our fears are real, but God knows all about them, and he cares. He cared enough to become one of us, to stoop down to our own level, to put his shoulder underneath the burden of all our fears and worries, and take it away. He cared enough to be born into our world, to live with us, to die for us, to be our Savior.

He brings a dramatic reversal to our lives. *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.* The gospel lesson this morning was a fulfillment of this prophecy. Jesus healed the blind, the deaf and the lame. Jesus' miracles of healing promise that someday we too will be healed. Someday every birth defect, every handicap, every disabling disease will be a thing of the past. No more cuts and bruises. No more pain. No more cancer. No more death.

How would God bring about a dramatic reversal? In the desert it begins with water. In our hearts, it begins with the Water of Life. Jesus invited us to come to him and drink and "living water would flow from within [you]." (John 7:38)

The water of life brings life to our dead hearts when water and word give us the washing of rebirth and renewal. Life grows in us when we hear and believe the good news of Jesus Christ.

With that life flowing in us we can be strong and fearless no matter what we face. Death, cancer, divorce, loss. Whatever comes into our lives we can face with strength because of Jesus. Our God will come with a dramatic reversal.

When you fear getting a heart attack or dying in an accident, through the cross, even death turns into life through Christ. When grandma or grandpa die in Christ, we not only mourn, but we also rejoice. Through faith in God's Word, the blind are given sight as we see things we could never see before: that there is a heaven, angels, hell and demons, things the world is blind to. These are the natural results that come from the salvation that God brings.

We can easily become disgusted with life. We can become discouraged with the world, with our country, even with our church. We can become disheartened by the apparent lack of commitment of other Christians. Picture yourself in a prison camp in World War II. The guards treat you badly. The food is terrible. You exist in freezing weather without the proper clothing. Disease is prevalent. In such a situation you might become fearful that you won't make it out alive.

What would your fellow captives do? They might keep getting together whenever possible and remind each other that they are not forgotten. They might share any good news about the war effort that they have received. They might remind each other that the allies will soon be coming to free them. That's what we are to do. That's what worship is all about. We get together to remind ourselves, *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."*

So, keep your heads up. Don't be round-shouldered Christians, looking at the ground with gloomy faces because of all the problems you have. Look up. Listen to God's promises and live with confidence in those promises. Look forward to the day when we will be free from all the troubles of this life and we will sing the endless song of praise.

Of course, we don't have to wait until Judgment Day for our singing to start. Look at how the deaf/mute reacted to Jesus' work in the Gospel Lesson. He couldn't stop telling others about what Jesus had done for him. A believer who reminds himself daily of all that God has done for him doesn't ask how much time he has to spend at church to show his thanks. He doesn't go through the actions of worship because that's what's expected of him. No! He sees worship as a privilege and even makes opportunities to praise God and encourage others.

Frank's incident brought him face to face with his own mortality and fear. Many things may make us afraid, but with the Lord and his promises, we can face life and our fears with confident faith. So, *"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."*