

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Quinquagesima Sunday
Isaiah 35:4-7
February 19th, 2012

The Children of Israel were slaves to the people of Egypt for more than 400 years. Moses led an Exodus of the people out of Egypt back to the Land of Promise – a Promised Land given by God – God gave it long ago to Abraham and his descendants and the Lord would keep His promise. And now after 40 years of wondering in the desert the children of God are about to cross the Jordan and face a whole host of new problems with taking back what rightfully belongs to them.

Moses died prior to entering into the Holy Land and Joshua was the one who God tapped to lead the people. The Lord said to Israel's new leader, "*I will be with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" Right there is another important promise.

And after that promise to Joshua come these words, "*Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous.*" Joshua was going to need that strength. Much courage and faith was needed for what was yet before the Children of Israel.

Now, fast forward 700 years. God's chosen people occupy the Land of Promise – God's Promised Land. They still are in desperate need of God's strength. And so, through the prophet Isaiah we hear these words which happen to be the Old Testament text appointed for this very day – the Sunday before the penitential season of Lent begins, "*Say to those with an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with 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; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy...*" Yet hundreds of years later the Lord is still saying to His children, "*Be strong; fear not!*" The Lord will give you eyes to see and ears to hear the important – life-giving things you so desperately need.

Fast forward again another 700 years and the scene is Jesus on the road to Jericho. God Himself meets one of these poor souls along the way. He's crying out to His Lord, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*" Interesting, St. Luke doesn't take time to give you his name, but St. Mark does. His name was Bartimaeus. And He would have never had one word to utter, unless the Savior came by that day. And when He did the blind received his sight. The Lord came by and made what couldn't see one thing – to see all things set before him. The Lord came by and said "*Be strong – now you see clearly. Be courageous – your faith has healed you. Fear not – for the Lord is with you, you see Him, He is yours.*" The Lord came and took Bartimaeus' fears away.

And while we are at it, let's fast forward one more time. Fast forward 2,000 years to present day. The message from God to Joshua – from God to Isaiah – from God to Bartimaeus (and also to the disciples of John the Baptizer, if you remember) – from God to you right now has not changed. Consider how the Lord came. He came and He was the one doing the giving. He came and said be strong and then told them what they needed to know and hear – "*I am with you.*"

The Old Testament text and the Gospel text both point out something very important for us today. It's a connection between the Lord coming to save and the people being able to see. Notice that the people didn't see first and then the Lord came. They didn't come to some sort of self-awareness about themselves first (and this doesn't happen physically or spiritually) and then after they do their work, God comes into their lives, does His work, makes people better Christians, helps you to help yourself. Listen again to Isaiah the prophet, "*He will come and*

save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.” The Lord is first.

As far as the story of blind Bartimaeus is concerned, it might seem that this beggar on the side of the road was first to call out to God – and then after he said something, Jesus now turns to him. Wrong. Jesus came first. He traveled down the road – He came along to save, *“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened.”*

Though blindness was the disability that Bartimaeus had to face each day – It’s the same disability we see in those who are “faithless” and even at times in our own selves. Spiritual blindness is sometimes our choice. While God comes to freely give sight to the spiritually blind – and that is acquired not by choice but by gift – we at times choose to look away. We choose blindness in our sins. We choose to ignore what it means to be a faithful Christian when we intentionally go the way of carrying forth what God would not have us to do – to ourselves, to our neighbor, to our family. And here it is, Christians who know better turn a blind eye to Christ and choose the wrong thing to say and the wrong action to carry out. Sometimes blindness is laziness and you end up getting weaker in your weaknesses. Sometimes blindness is self gratification at the expense of keeping the Lord’s law. Spiritual blindness makes us weak because we choose the opposite of what God freely gives. Christians like all of us in weakness that will get weaker without Christ choose to do the wrong thing – to say the wrong thing.

Isaiah says, *“He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped...”* Beloved, even in your faith you are the blind beggar on the side of the road that leads to Jericho. For this reason each of our days are in need of Jesus coming along the way and giving us sight. And while He is giving us sight to see what is needful for eternal life – that is the cross of Christ – He pronounces this upon you; *“Be strong and fear not!”* You were blind but now you see. This gifting event happened once at Calvary on Good Friday and continues to happen for us each day in Christ’s out-pouring of life and forgiveness. Be strong and fear not – The Lord comes to the blind and the weak. Be strong and fear not – He is on His way again down the road where we sit as a beggar. Be strong and fear not – Jesus is there giving sight to the blind. Be strong and fear not because in Christ there is no death – in Christ we live.

Be strong – are declarative words shared by the Lord who gives faith – even in our times of weakness. In our weaknesses, beloved in the Lord, we are in good company. Men like Joshua and the great King David had moments of great weakness. Elijah the prophet of the Lord was exhausted after running from Queen Jezebel. Last week we heard of the weaknesses of St. Paul when he told the church in Corinth, *“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”* So that we know we are not alone we hear of how the blessed St. Paul spoke of his hardships, his sleepless nights and his hunger and thirst in cold exposure. He spoke of his countless beatings and imprisonments and his great labors. Beloved, I speak of such weaknesses so that you may realize you are not alone.

Be strong – the Lord has made the blind to see and the deaf to hear. It’s the Lord’s work and when weakness overcomes our hearts – those things that make us blind or deaf – those things that trouble our lives, listen to His strength. Receive His gifts. In faith you see what you need – and these are the gifts given to us sinners that bring us to life everlasting. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen