

December 11, 2022
Isaiah 35:1-10

Advent 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow”

“Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God . . . He will come and save you.’”

The Optimist Club Memorial Clock Tower stands outside the Optimist Club Hall at the corner of Dorchester Avenue and Morrison Street in Niagara Falls, Ontario. The tower was erected in 2000 in honour of the new millennium and to memorialize prominent citizens in the community. As the tower stood only a few blocks from our home, I would pass it frequently and often would be looking at it as I waited at a traffic light. One day, as I was staring at this familiar sight, a strange thought came into my head: “I’m sure there’s not a Pessimists’ Club, because they would figure there would be no use in organizing a club in the first place!”

There may not be a “Pessimists’ Club,” but pessimism seems to be gaining the upper hand as we come to the end of 2022. Many people feel pessimistic about the state of the world today, and many are losing hope for themselves, for their children, and for the world. A recent Gallup Poll reported that the concern of many Americans over the economy and the direction of the country is borne out in their low optimism about the next generation’s prospects of living a better life than their parents. The CBC reported that almost three out of four Canadians are concerned about their future and the future of their families (new Canadians, however, are much more optimistic). The economy, climate change, uncertainty in the aftermath of Covid, and concerns about increasing political polarization are factors fuelling this pessimistic outlook about the future. While the Optimist Club believes that by “*providing hope and positive vision, Optimists bring out the best in youth, our communities and ourselves,*” a Pessimists’ Club might find their credo in the words of Ecclesiastes: “*Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there is nothing to be gained under the sun.*” (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

It is easy to give in to pessimism and despair as we consider the state of our world and the darkness that at times appears to be winning the day; but even though we are surrounded by darkness both in the physical and political worlds, the words of the prophet call us to look beyond these sources of despair to the hope that comes to us in this season of Advent. The Word of God announces to us as it announced to God’s

people of old that no matter how dire the circumstances of the world in which we live may be, the prophet calls God's people to "*Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God ... He will come and save you*" (Isaiah 35:4). God's people can live in trust and hope that in the future that God will fulfill for God's people, "*everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away*" (35:10). The prophet "*locates God's promise within every human lack, every loneliness, and every desolation. It locates God's promise within a complex history of slavery and redemption, failure and faith.*" (Anathea Portier-Young).

The prophet begins his proclamation by announcing that the natural order will be dramatically transformed, and that the "ransomed of the LORD" (35:10) will come in joy to Zion. While not specific individual or community is addressed, the prophet proclaims that the desert will be changed into a place flourishing with vegetation, so that even the land itself will rejoice: "*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing*" (35:1-2a). "Wilderness" (*midbar*) has many meanings for Israel. It is a place of flight and freedom, especially when the Israelites fled into the wilderness following their liberation from slavery in Egypt ("*So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea*" – Exodus 13:18). The wilderness was a place populated by deadly animals and where water was scarce ("*... the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions.*" – Deuteronomy 8:15). The wilderness is also a place where it was easy to get lost ("*Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.*" – Psalm 107:4-5). The wilderness became the place where God's people learned to trust God: "*In wilderness God found God's people, guarded and cared for them, and lifted them up*" (Portier-Young).

The wilderness that had played such a pivotal role in Israel's history with God will now be a place of abundance and rejoicing. While it is not said that the Lord will bring about this transformation, since the purpose or result of this rejoicing is that "*they shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God*" (35:2b), it can be assumed that the people will know that it is the Lord God of Israel who will bring about this transformation in which the arid land will become as glorious with vegetation as Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon.

The proclamation of Isaiah speaks not only of God's actions in the future but also how God will bless God's people in the present. With this shift from future to present tense also comes a shift in focus "*from earth to people, from dry land to weak and*

frightened bodies, from green growth to courage and strength” (Portier-Young). While neither speaker nor addressee are identified in this exhortation, since the imperatives are plural, and God is mentioned in the third person one must conclude that the prophetic voice is addressing the people as a whole or a group of people within them. The people are urged to “*strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees,*” declaring 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.’*” (35:3-4). The prophet’s words of assurance will again be spoken to the exiles in Babylon when they hear the prophetic voice proclaiming “*get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings; lift them up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’*” (40:9). Those who are afraid will gain courage from the announcement that help is coming, that the prophet’s words offer assurance for the present as well as the future.

- “If we are anxiously afraid that we are not among those who are chosen, or if we are tempted concerning our election, we should give thanks and rejoice that we are anxious, because we may confidently know that God cannot lie ... Therefore we should throw ourselves with all our hearts onto the truthfulness of God who gave his promise, and we should turn ourselves away from what we know of the wrath of God, and will be chosen and saved.” – Martin Luther.

While the prophet does not describe the specific conditions of oppression that the people are suffering, Isaiah does speak in general terms in a direct address to the audience: God “*will come and save you.*” (35:4b). God’s arrival will also herald a time of healing in which “*the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*” (35:5-6). It will also be a time when the wilderness will be transformed, when “*waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 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*” (35:6b-7). This vision of water in the wilderness and streams in the desert recollects the Lord’s care for Israel in the wilderness and echoes Isaiah’s image of the return of the exiles from Babylon:

- “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock of Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’ Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah

and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” – Exodus 17:5-7.

- “I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together, so that all may see and know, all may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.” – Isaiah 41:18-20.

God’s arrival will transform *“every inability into ability and every lack into miraculous abundance. God’s coming brings the capacity to see and hear to those whose senses are starving for light and sound.”* (Portier-Young).

As the wilderness in Exodus was the place through which God guided the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt to a return to the Promised Land of Canaan, in the transformed wilderness that Isaiah proclaims there will be a means by which the people who have been scattered will be gathered again: *“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; nor traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.”* (35:8). On this “Holy Way” the familiar threats to travellers in the desert – dry land, wild beasts, and enemies – will no longer exist. “Holy Way” suggests that this is a pilgrims’ highway; the people God has redeemed and ransomed will walk on it: *“the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing”* (35:10). This sacred road is restricted to those who are made “holy” (*qodes*) by the Lord; the ritually “unclean” (*t’ame*) may not travel it. The highway to Zion will be so plain that even fools can find and travel its path. Moreover, passage will be safe, for *“no lion will be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it”* (35:9). The “redeemed,” the “ransomed of the LORD,” are people who have been released by the Lord’s intervention – from Egypt, Babylon and elsewhere – and thus are free to return to Zion. Their return will form a festive procession with singing and joyful celebration. The motif of joy and gladness returns to the initial verse of the chapter when the wilderness itself shall *“rejoice with joy and singing”*; now God’s people will be the one who will rejoice. Those who are experiencing “sorrow and sighing” shall find that all that has afflicted God’s people *“shall flee away”* (35:10).

- “In the depiction of a restored Israel, the highway for the dispersed, the blossoming wilderness, the opened eyes and strengthened limbs, we are given a glimpse of the joy that will obtain in days to come. Isaiah 35 tells of sorrow

and sighing fleeing away and of a highway to Zion for the dispersed.” – Christopher Seitz.

- “Through divine action the people of God become the redeemed of God, and that transforms their lives in every possible way.” – Gene M. Tucker.

Isaiah’s vision of a hope-filled future becomes the basis for Jesus’ response to John the Baptist when the imprisoned baptizer sends his disciples to ask Jesus “*are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*” (Matthew 11:3). John the Baptist is the one who fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy of “*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’*” (Matthew 3:3; Isaiah 40:3). Now, as he languishes in Herod’s prison, John begins to wonder if Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of God’s promise of a Messiah, the “*one who is more powerful than I [who] is coming after me ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*” (3:11). So he sends his disciples to ask Jesus a simple “yes or no” question: are you, or are you not, the Messiah?

Jesus does not respond to John by saying either “yes I am the Messiah” or “no I am not the One who is to come.” Instead, Jesus points back to Isaiah’s promise that is being fulfilled in Jesus’ ministry: “*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them*” (11:4-5). Through his words and deeds, Jesus is declaring to John and to all of us that once again God has fulfilled God’s promises, that what was spoken by the prophets has been accomplished in the presence of Jesus, the one who truly is “*the Messiah, the son of the living God*” (16:16).

- “Throughout Isaiah we find prophecies of the final age, when God will bring healing into a hurting world of men and women ... Assuming that John picked up on these allusions, he must have understood the answer loud and clear. Jesus was indeed affirming his messianic identity. Even more, he was strengthening the Baptist’s faith by grounding it in the Word of God. Everything was proceeding according to God’s plan as envisioned by Isaiah.” – Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri.

Isaiah’s vision of hope that Jesus identifies in being fulfilled in his life and ministry is the basis for our hope in a world where hope appears to be in short supply, when more people may find themselves despairing of any possibility of a bright future for themselves, their children, or the world. It is the basis of the hope that is expressed

by the despairing people of Lamentations, a communal lament in which the people cry out *“is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.”* (Lamentations 1:12). But amid such profound mourning and despair shines a word of brilliant light and hope that is rooted in God’s Word:

- “The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” – Lamentations 3:19-23.

It is this sure and certain hope in God’s steadfast love that is the source of confidence for people in the depths of despair; it is the basis for optimism even when the circumstances of our lives or of the world in which we live gives us little basis for hope. Christians look to the future with hope because we know that God is faithful, that the Word of the Lord is a source of blessing for us as it was for God’s people of old, and that the promise of God’s loving presence gives us *“strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine with ten thousand beside!”* (ELW Hymn 733). These words from the beloved hymn *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* were written by Thomas O. Chisholm, inspired by the words of Lamentations. Although Chisholm suffered under poor health throughout his life, he found strength and hope in God’s Word; when asked what inspired him to write this hymn, Chisholm responded that *“God has been faithful in the past, is faithful in the present, and will continue to be faithful till the end of the age.”*

- “Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father; there is no shadow of turning with thee; thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not; as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be. Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see; all I have needed thy had hath provided; great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!”

The Optimist Club clock tower still stands in Niagara Falls, as does the Optimist Club whose mission is based *“in the belief that the giving of one’s self in service to other will advance the well-being of humankind, community life and the world.”* For Christians whose faith is rooted in the sure and certain hope that is ours in God’s holy Word, who believe that what God promised through the prophet has been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, we also look to the future with trust and hope, because we have the assurance that God’s steadfast love and strengthening presence will continue to

give us “*strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.*” Even in the darkest moments, God’s people can “*rejoice, give thanks, and sing*” because we know that the child born of Mary is *Emmanuel – God with us*, the one whose grace brought us safe thus far, and the one whose grace will lead us home.

Amen.