



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Do Not Fear

Isaiah 35:3-7a

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Isaiah 35v3&4 *“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way. 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.”*

This is a message to people who are in the thick of it. Their hands have been working so hard that they have become feeble. Their hearts are so frightened that their knees are giving way. This is an overwhelming situation.

So what does God say to people in that situation? He says, “Be strong. Do not fear.” He knows that fear is our natural response to a threat to ourselves or those we care about. But as God’s children, we are called to operate not out of natural reasoning, but out of trust in a good God.

When life turns to custard, if we don’t believe in God’s goodness we will be like a drowning man with nothing to cling to. If we cling to God’s faithfulness, despite our circumstances, we are like the man who built his house upon a rock. The storms lashed his house, the floods rose, bad things happened, but the house stood firm because its foundations were rock-solid.

When Isaiah says, “Do not fear”, he adds, “Your God will come.” The people of God may feel abandoned, but the truth is that God will come to save them out of the enemy’s hands. We must not give our feelings a higher place than the Word of God. God is faithful to his promises to save us. Help will come. We must tell ourselves as in Psalm 145, “The Lord is faithful to all His promises and loving towards all he has made.”

Isaiah goes on to say in v4, “Your God will come! He will come with vengeance, with divine retribution, he will come to save you.” This means that God will not let the guilty go unpunished. Those who have treated you unfairly will be held accountable. God is a God of justice. Psalm 89 tells us, “Righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne.” So when Jesus commands us to forgive those who have hurt us, or to turn the other cheek, we can be confident that the guilty ones will not get off scot-free. When we feel very hurt, we want the guilty person to be punished! Well, Isaiah assures us that they will pay and God will personally see to it. Our job, according to Jesus, is to not to hold it against them. To choose to forgive. To release them into the hands of a just God. Then toxic and vengeful thoughts will not consume us and make us bitter.

How can we find the grace not to seek revenge? It is precisely in the sure knowledge that God will see that justice is done in the end. Jesus says, “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”ⁱ Leave the punishing to God.

The next few verses in Isaiah are prophetic. When Jesus came, the eyes of the blind were literally opened, the ears of the deaf, unstopped. The lame leapt and the mute spoke. But this is part of a bigger picture. Isaiah 35 is the culmination of the first part of this prophetic book, which describes the sweep of human history from the beginning to the finale. We are privileged to share in the drama of God's world. We can in some measure choose what part we will play. We can express the compassion of Jesus by obeying his command to heal the sick. We take our place in the history of the world, co-operating with God in our sphere of influence, in prayer and in obedient action. We can walk with Jesus on the highway of holiness described later in the chapter.

So make sure that fear does not rob you of the place God has prepared for you in the culmination of the ages. There are 365 times in the Bible where we are told "Do not fear." That's one for every day of the year. And it is a command, not a suggestion. We show that we love God by obeying him, 1 John 5:3 says. If we are given the command, "Do not fear," it must be possible to make a mental choice not to fear. So how is that done?

First, recognise it as a command. Call fear by its true name: SIN. "I'm sorry, Lord. I have let this thing dwell in me and grow. I choose to let it go, turn my back on it and trust in You." Then determine to be obedient. Determine not to allow even a tiny bit of anxiety or worry into our minds. Speak the scriptures out loud. Write them on a card and keep them in your wallet. When the fear tries to sneak in, bring out the card and repeat what God says out loud. "I will not fear, for God is with me. I choose not to be afraid because God is faithful. He will not allow me to be tested beyond what I can cope with." If it sounds hard to do, remember that even Jesus said to his father, "By myself, I can do nothing."ⁱⁱⁱ So we don't need to be ashamed to ask God for help.

We can also ask a friend or our home group to keep us accountable. A good friend will say to us straight forwardly, "Don't give in to fear. Stop going down that anxiety track." Fear is a sneaky thing and comes in guises that seem reasonable but tie us in knots. Perhaps our investments are going down the drain. Perhaps a medical diagnosis is hanging over our heads. Perhaps a relationship we have relied upon seems very shaky. There are always things coming up that will make fear seem a reasonable response. But our job is to walk in faith, not in fear. Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the Word of God, the Scripture says. Faith is a reasonable response to hearing God's word.

God will come to save us from even things that are our own fault. He will not ignore us if we say, "I am sorry, I got myself into this mess. Please save me and help me." That's why it is so immensely important that we are clear in our minds what kind of God we serve. If God is trustworthy, whatever the situation looks like, we can put our whole weight on his faithfulness.

Secondly, when fear seems the reasonable response, doubt your fears in the light of who God is. Our shepherd. Our friend. Our comforter. Our help and deliverer.

Thirdly, when fear seems reasonable, doubt your thoughts. God's thoughts are wiser than ours. Ask for Scriptures to hang onto, scriptures to correct your thinking. I was strongly questioning the wisdom of following the doctor's advice recently. After all, the doctor is not God! So I prayed about it and a Scripture reference came to mind. I had no idea what the content of the verse was. When I looked it up, there were the words, "Take it." I could then choose to act out of faith in what God had said, not out of fear. I do not understand why - but the "Why?" question is not often answered.

Fourthly, when fear seems reasonable, check the source of your reasoning. Are you reasoning from a position of self-reliance, assuming you know everything about the situation? Think again. Choose to rely on Jesus, who is the Truth: stronger, wiser, and more powerful than yourself.ⁱⁱⁱ

You might think of the verse, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. The one who fears is not made perfect (or matured) in love."^{iv} So it is an ongoing thing. Becoming mature does not happen overnight. Think of a good wine which matures over time. Think of a green pear, which looks good but is actually hard as nails and is no good to eat. It needs time to soften and mature into being sweet and good to eat. So if you have identified fear in your life today, do not ignore it, like the person who sees an ugly, infected spot on their face in the mirror, then walks away and forgets. Better to put some antiseptic on it regularly and it will go away, not get worse or spread.

The word of God is like the antiseptic cream. It kills the infection. If you are prone to fear, use it three times a day for best effect and start when the infection is small, don't wait until it gets big. You can say something like, "I choose not to fear because the Lord is my provider".

Isaiah says "Strengthen the feeble hands." Hands get feeble when you don't use them. Use them by opening your Bible and thinking God's thoughts instead of your own fearful ones. You may remember that after David had killed Goliath, he had to flee from Saul's murderous intent. He went to speak to Abimelech in Nob, where the sword that had belonged to Goliath was kept. He unwrapped it and said, "I will take that. There is none like it." When David was younger he could not have used that sword, because he had not been trained and had not strengthened his hands enough to use a sword. After he had killed Goliath and won the princess, he didn't sit around eating kingly food and drinking expensive wine, he learned how to handle weapons.^v

Are you strengthening your hands spiritually by reading and applying the word of God to your life?^{vi}

"Steady the knees that give way!" Isaiah says. When fear strikes, the best response is to use those knees in prayer. Here is a link that will help you if you don't know how to pray. It is a talk by Rick Warren:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S82EJ14zIM>

If you don't have time to listen to him for an hour, here is a short version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c45WyF4xapg>

"Do not fear, for I shall be with you: I have called you by name and you are mine!"^{vii}

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ⁱ Luke 6:28

ⁱⁱ John 5:30

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 55:9

^{iv} 1 John 4:18

^v Ps 18:34

^{vi} Look at the St Stephen's website and read two sermons entitled "Strengthen Yourself in the Lord." Search under www.ststephenswgp.org.nz/sermons

^{vii} Isaiah 41:10
