

Ruin and Restoration

When you leave this place this morning, I want you to leave with hope and faith in the promises of God. Promises that renew. Promises that bring about the mending of all that is torn apart. Promises that bring about life and restoration in the midst of death and desolation. So that you may know the promises of God, I'd like to spend a short time considering the Old Testament text set before us.

When you first come across this text, nothing could seem more magnificent, more extraordinary, more wonderful than the image described by Isaiah. Chapter 35 describes what seems like a perfect picture of a world restored and renewed. The wilderness and dry land are glad. The desert rejoices and blossoms abundantly. Weak hands are strengthened. Feeble knees are made firm. Anxious hearts are put at peace with the hope of the coming Lord. Blind eyes are opened. Deaf ears are unstopped. Lame men leap like deer. Mute tongues sing, *sing*, for joy. Water breaks forth into a dry, thirsty wilderness. Burning sands are made a pool! Anything destroyed is rebuilt. Anything desolate is filled with good things. Anything broken is fixed. Yes, nothing could seem more magnificent, more extraordinary, or more wonderful than the image described by Isaiah. And it's God who comes to bring this all about.

Yet, there's more to this text than meets the eye. There's more below the surface. On the surface of the text, everything looks magnificent, extraordinary, wonderful. God will come with recompense. He comes to save what seems beyond saving. Eyes that open but can't see. Ears that have eardrums but can't hear. Men and women that have legs but can't walk. Desert lands that aren't just desolate; they're burning. In this text, the Lord comes and saves what seems beyond saving. But, lurking below this text is the rest of the story. How did the wilderness become dry? How did hands become weak and knees become feeble? How did eyes become blind, ears deaf, legs lame, and tongues mute?

The answer to this question comes all the way back in Isaiah 6. It's a chapter that most of us are familiar with. It's a text that occurs twice in our lectionary. It's a picture of something magnificent, something extraordinary, something wonderful. Isaiah hears a voice and sees something inexpressible. The Lord, God Almighty, sitting on his throne. As much as the word "awesome" has been diluted in our language, no other word can truly express Isaiah's feeling. He feels full of awe, but in every bad way. He's seen the Lord, but he's unclean. He's sinful. He should die. That's what happens when you see the Lord. But an angel cleanses his lips. His

sins are forgiven. Isaiah's there to heed the call of the Lord. "Here am I! Send me!" And that's where we usually stop. It's magnificent. It's extraordinary. It's wonderful. The call of Isaiah is one of mercy and forgiveness. On the surface, it's a story of life, restoration, and salvation.

But, rarely do we read on. Rarely do we hear the rest of the back story. Under all the "holy, holy, holy"s and all the "your guilt has been taken away"s and all the "your sins have been atoned for"s is something below the surface. It's something we don't like to think about, let alone face head on. *And he said, "Go, and say to this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.*

In chapter 35, Isaiah paints a picture of the Lord's coming. It's a magnificent picture of restoration. It's an extraordinary image of renewal. It's the reality of the Lord's coming in wonderful rebirth. But the reality of our text has much below the surface of promises we see. Below the surface, reality is made much more complicated by Isaiah chapter 6. On the surface, our text is full of God's promises. These promises are magnificent. They're wonderful and extraordinary. Most importantly of all, they're trustworthy. God's promise of salvation from death and desolation is sure. He *will* come and he *will* save. But under the surface of our text, God, this same God who makes promises of restoration, is the one who caused death and desolation in the first place. This same God is the one who caused eyes to be blind, ears to be deaf, and tongues to be mute. This God destroyed houses and cities and made the land into a desolate and forsaken wasteland. The sand burns in the wilderness that God has created, and no water can quench it. Yes, this is the reality hidden under the text set before us this morning. And what a confusing and difficult reality this is to experience!

I'm sure it's hard for any of you to disagree with me! The reality of the text is one where God promises to renew and restore *that which he himself destroyed*. It's a confusing reality, at best. And truly, it's the reality that we live in. It's a reality in which God blinds people so that they can see. Where he shuts ears so that they might hear. Where the Lord cripples in order to

make people walk. Where he lays waste to the land in order to make it lush and fruitful. Where this same God kills so that he might make alive. It's a reality where *you* seem confused and blinded when others claim to see. Where *you* can't hear the voice of God, while others claim to hear it clearly. Where sometimes it seems impossible to walk on the path set before you, while others are bounding seemingly unshackled through the course. Where the good seem to die young and the evil live long lives. This reality is confusing. It's difficult. And one of the effects of living in such a reality is that people begin to question whether or not God is a good God. With all the pain, suffering, madness, and desolation in this reality, people find it hard to believe that God is truly good. Perhaps he's some distant God who doesn't care one way or another what happens in this world. And so people begin to believe it. God doesn't care. He's not good, or caring, or involved in what's going on. And people begin to base their lives around this idea. They live like God doesn't care...so why should they?

The other effect is very closely related. Living in this reality, people begin to question whether God even exists. The now famous atheist evangelist, Richard Dawkins, questions the existence of God in this reality better than anyone. *The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully...What makes my jaw drop is that people today should base their lives on such an appalling role model as Yahweh-and even worse, that they should bossily try to force the same evil monster (whether fact or fiction) on the rest of us.* And therefore, the argument goes, this God doesn't exist. He can't. Even if he did, why would anyone want anything to do with him? It's an argument that we can't ignore. Maybe some of us even hear that and begin to doubt. The reality of the text – the reality that we live in – is one where God does things that seem questionable, at best, downright evil, at worst. He closes eyes and ears and makes desolate lands that were once lush and fruitful. How could God do such things?

Now let me be clear. I'm *not* saying that everything we see as evil is from God. I'm *not* saying that God *must have* given you a tumor or struck you blind or caused you sickness, for this reason or that. I'm not claiming "the ends justify the means." What I *am* saying is that the reality we live in is much more than what we see on the surface. We may hear of God blinding, making deaf, or destroying what we see as good. Indeed, there is much more going on

underneath what we see. In this reality, what God is doing brings about good. If God hadn't done these things, we would still be in our sins. We would have no hope. There would be no picture of magnificent meadows, extraordinary elation, or wonderful springs of water. These texts, this reality, begin to get to the center of how God works. How could a good God do seemingly horrible things? Not because he is evil, or ambivalent, or distant. He does these things because he wants to make things new, make them alive, make them even better than they are. He himself comes into this reality, a reality full of the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute – and the dead. He himself comes into this reality and is made to feel tortured and helpless. It's there, on the cross of Calvary, at the desolate haunt known as the "Place of the Skull," that God himself brings about the evil of the world into the eyes and ears of his Son, who is made unable to walk and hardly able to speak. It's there that death and desolation take hold of the body of the Son of God. It's there, in the tomb, that God is questioned, grilled, doubted, and made suspect, because the very body of the Son of God is made desolate and dead. But...but...it's through this very body that God begins the very work of renewal, restoration, and resurrection. It's at this now empty tomb that Jesus not only forgives your sins of doubt and mistrust but forever lays them to rest.

It's in this text, this text set before us, that the Lord God removes from our eyes, ears, tongues, and minds any sense that he is out for evil. The reality is that doubt has been removed from our own reality, where the promises of God *are made reality*. The blind see. The deaf discern sound. The silent tongues speak. The lame leap for joy. The burning sand gushes with generous geysers of water. From death flows the breath of life. Here, the Lord blasts open the surface of our reality and reveals that he's making all things new. It's here that Christ can say, *This man was blind that the works of God might be displayed in him.*

When you leave this place, I said that I wanted you to leave with hope and faith in the promises of God. Indeed, it's exactly when we leave this place that the promises of God become most important. It's out there in a reality of desolation and death that the promise of life and restoration come quickly into focus. Out there, in the reality of blindness and deafness the promise of seeing God and hearing his proclamation of victory becomes something to cling to. Out there, in the desert reality of Eastern Washington, where brush is dry as a bone and the earth burns beneath your feet, that the promise of water and streams quenches your thirsty souls. And it's in here, in your baptism, that he killed you, only to make you alive. Though you had been

made blind of his body and blood, you now see past the bread and the wine. Though you, the sinner made crippled, stumbled and crawled along the way set before you, the Lord picked you up and strengthened your legs to run the race. Though our reality is one of desolation, destruction, and death, the promises of God are sure. They are trustworthy. God will restore the land of ruin. He will rebuild the destruction. He will resurrect the dead. This reality is God's reality. And he has promised to come and make all things new. His promise is sure. Come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.