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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
8 September 2024

Sermon on Isaiah 35:4-7a

Worship Theme:

FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST SEE THE TRUE PURPOSE OF HIS POWER

Power is neither inherently good nor bad. Fire is powerful. The chef uses fire to create meals. But the arsonist uses fire to destroy homes. What matters is the purpose of the one who has that power. Jesus has limitless power, and he used his power for good. That doesn't mean everyone understood Jesus' true purpose, which was to save us from sin and give us the gift of eternal life. Followers of Christ see the true purpose of his power.

Sermon Theme: "What to Expect When God Comes"

Grace, and mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!

Life is full of expectations. We expect that if we go to work, we'll get paid; if we go to sleep at night, we'll wake up feeling rested; if we eat, we'll feel full and satisfied; if the weather is getting colder, summer is ending and fall is on the way. We have expectations about all the different things in our lives, and many of those expectations are the way they are because of the experiences we have had. If we've had positive experiences, our expectations are probably higher; if our experiences have not been so great, our expectations are likely much lower.

So what about God – what are your expectations of him? We all have some sort of expectations about God which generally fall into one of two categories: either we expect God to do something, or we don't. Which of those two camps we're in often depends on what our experience with God has been. Maybe you grew up in the church and you've always known God and your life has been one blessing after another – "God is Good" is literally plastered on signs all over your house and boy, that's a truth you stand tall and proud on! Or maybe you grew up in the church and you've always known God and your life has been one tragedy after another, a constant uphill battle (if you're even moving at all), and each night you hope and pray for just a few hours rest and release from the pain. Or maybe you're someone who is just beginning to know God and you have no idea yet what he is capable of doing and how knowing him might change your life. Whether any of those describe you or you're somewhere in the middle of them all, no matter what our background is, we all have expectations of God.

A better question might be – are they good, realistic expectations? After all, our hearts and minds are completely affected by our sins. It's realistic to say "It's getting colder out so fall must be coming" – we know that because we experience it every year! Is it just as realistic to say, "I'm a sinful imperfect human being, yet I'm pretty confident that I can fully understand the inner workings of the plans and

purposes of the Lord simply based on my personal experiences with him.”? It should seem pretty clear that one of those statements is reasonable and one is not.

Yet we often live as if both are true, don't we. We assume our experiences have revealed to us everything there is to know about God – who he is, what he does, what he wants, how he works. We think we've mastered the mind of the Lord and can see everything he plans and does, or if we're on the other side, all the times and places God has failed to do what he should have done. And we base it all on what we've seen and heard.

Our conclusions are so often misguided though, aren't they? Even if we have been so remarkably blessed in our lives with “God is Good” visible everywhere we look, we've all had moments when we've said things like “this problem is too big for God to handle” or “this problem is too little for God to care about” or “God must have more important things to take care of than this” or “I'm not important enough for God to waste his effort on” or even something like “I've been in this situation more times than I can count and he's never done anything before so why would he now?” No matter which direction our thoughts take us, we end up significantly limiting the love, care, and power of God. We expect God will not come for this.

What a dangerously slippery slope that is. As soon as we let our experiences dictate what we think and believe about God, we're in serious trouble. Just think what that might have resulted in for the people Isaiah described in our reading today – the *blind, deaf, lame, mute*. Their life experience could very easily have led them to the conclusion that God is weak, absent, unloving, uncaring, a God who never does anything to benefit or help people, a God who is unkind and unfair, a God not worth following because he will never come for me.

So in response to our tainted experience and our incorrect conclusions and assumptions, the Word of God stands in shining contrast, allowing God himself to explain who he is and what he does. We don't need to discover or determine these things for ourselves because God has already clearly laid them out for us! Through the Prophet Isaiah, God says: *Say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come.* God is not an unloving, uncaring, absent God who cares only about himself and does absolutely nothing for people. No, God will come!

In fact, he already has. From Isaiah's standpoint, God had not yet come to his people in the way he promised, that is, as a Savior. God had promised to send a Messiah Savior into the world to take all the punishment for sin upon himself and to release people from eternal bondage and death. Around 700 years after Isaiah, Jesus came into the world to do exactly what he promised. By then people had been waiting so long that many had changed their expectations of him from a spiritually-focused Savior from sin to a powerful worldly King who would elevate their status as a nation. Many others had stopped expecting him altogether.

But Jesus came nevertheless. The expectations and experiences of human beings did not stop the Savior's arrival or change the mission he came to fulfill. **What to Expect When God Came** was determined by God and revealed in his Word, not determined by people and what we heard, saw, or thought. And when

Jesus came, he was completely focused on perfectly completing the mission his Father had given him, because that and that alone was what would save people from sin.

Even though Jesus' primary mission was always to use his power to defeat sin and Satan and to save mankind from eternal death, he also found many times and ways to demonstrate God's love by caring for the temporary earthly struggles of his people, whether they expected it or not. Remember the words from Isaiah: *Be strong, do not fear; your God will come. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.* In the Gospel we heard just a few moments ago, we saw one of the times when Jesus fulfilled these very words! *Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.* (Mark 7:33b-35)

Through Isaiah and in many other places throughout his Word, God revealed to mankind **What to Expect When God Comes** – he did amazing things, "*all things well!*", as we also heard in Mark 7. Human logic and experience tell us a miracle like a deaf and mute person receiving full healing just from a little spit, some dirt, and a spoken word isn't even remotely possible. But Jesus came to do the miraculous and the impossible, far beyond human explanation and expectation.

And he continued to do so for his entire time on earth. Jesus defied every expectation by doing what God the Father had decided he must. He further defied every expectation by doing it perfectly – even the devil expected Jesus to fail at that! And Jesus defied every expectation by taking none of the credit for his perfect life and giving it all freely to us instead.

That's the same God who still comes and works in his world today. The coming of God is never an "if"; it's always a "when." God is absolutely able to provide healing and relief for any physical need, and frequently does so according to his perfect eternal purposes and plans for us. But of course he doesn't stop with just physical needs. He also provides spiritual healing and relief and complete newness of life by grace through Christ. He opens spiritually blind eyes to see his glory and his mercy. He opens spiritually deaf ears to hear his Holy Word and to be filled with comfort and peace. He strengthens spiritually lame feet to joyfully take his message of salvation to people and places all around the world. And he loosens spiritually mute tongues to shout and sing his praises, eagerly sharing with others the good news of the Savior we have in Christ.

There's so much to tell! No one expected God to become a human being, and yet he did. No one expected God to subject himself to his own laws, and yet he did. No one expected sinners to be forgiven and set free without any payment or punishment on their part whatsoever, yet we are. No one expected God to open heaven to people freely as a gift for all eternity, yet he has.

No one except God, that is. God did exactly what he planned to do right from the very beginning. As he revealed through Isaiah, "*Be strong, do not fear;*

your God will come, he will come to save you.” Our sin-tainted expectations and dreadfully-limited experiences will never bring us to these conclusions about God. But his Word can and does. In his Word, we find that the true purpose of Jesus’ power was not to do what we thought was best, but to do what God already knew was infinitely better. In his Word, we find peace, comfort, strength, and power beyond our wildest imagination, and God puts it all to work for us and our eternal benefit. That’s true even now while we live in between the times of Jesus’ physical presence on earth. He already came once as the Savior and perfectly accomplished his mission to defeat sin, Satan, and death. Now we eagerly watch and wait for his final coming when he returns on the Last Day.

And we don’t need to wonder what will happen when he does – we already know **What to Expect When God Comes: trumpets and angels and a glorious living Christ who gathers his people and brings us to our eternal home in heaven!** Unending joy in the presence of our God forever – what a gift! Whether we experience the very greatest life there is on earth or whether our days are filled with constant challenges and hardships, we remain safely in the arms of the God who loves us with an everlasting love. He cleanses us from all our sin and reframes every experience we have by keeping our no-longer-blind eyes firmly focused on him, our no-longer-deaf ears gladly hearing his Word, and our no-longer-mute tongues shouting his praises with joy. Thank you, Lord, for exceeding all our expectations by coming to us with such incredible mercy and love. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.