

**ISAIAH 35:1-10**  
**HOPE REPLACES FEAR**

A children's play can be a frightening experience for many a young person, standing up in front of the congregation, trying to memorize lines, forgetting lines, being unable to say lines – even if they are written right in front of you. Many a child has gone through that experience. For other kids the whole experience can be fun and joyful. They know they are the center of attention, and they enjoy that. It's something else that causes them to feel afraid, something else that causes adults to feel afraid. It's not only children who get afraid, but we adults also get afraid, afraid of going out on a first date, afraid of not getting that first job, afraid of losing a job, afraid of losing a spouse or a child who grows up and goes off to college. There's much that we can be afraid of at any age, and God realizes that, and so we hear from Him over and over again saying, "Fear not!" "Do not be afraid!"

It's good to hear those words from God at any time of the year, but we hear them and focus on them more around the coming of Christmas, because Christmas brings us Jesus who comes to remove our fears. That's what our reading is about – the removal of fear and bad things. Our reading tries to picture that badness with a wilderness, a dry land, a desert with burning sand, but in that bad place there comes gladness and blooming flowers.

How do you picture happy times? Our reading pictures it with flowers and singing. We had lots of singing in our children's program, and every year I see one I hear from the congregation how much they enjoy listening to the children sing.

So children, if you came up here today with wobbly knees and fearful hearts, afraid that you might not do everything right, know this, today you brought joy to many people. For all of us God tells us to be strong and not to be afraid. Those are easy words to say, but they don't always take the fear away, at least not right away.

So let's look at how God is trying to take our fears away. Let's look at what happened as that first Christmas drew near.

"There appeared to Zechariah an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "**Do not be afraid**, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John" the Baptist. (Luke 1:11-13)

"The angel said to Mary, "**Do not be afraid**, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus." (Luke 1:30-31)

“In the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "**Fear not**, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:8-11).

There was a lot of fear at those announcements of the coming of Jesus, but the angels kept telling people that they didn't need to be afraid, but rather this was a good thing, a reason to rejoice. That's what our reading is still telling us today. You have a reason to rejoice. Your God has come to save you!

God doesn't wish to threaten and terrify His people. Sometimes He has to discipline us when we do things that are wrong. Sometimes He wishes to test and strengthen our faith, but He doesn't wish to terrify you. He takes no pleasure in the destruction of any person in hell who turns from Him to wicked ways. God is more interested in bringing you His forgiveness, bringing you hope, and bringing you life.

That's what Christmas is about. God sends Jesus to die on the cross to bring you God's forgiveness. Then with the knowledge that all of your sins are forgiven you can have hope for this life, and for the life to come, and He brings you into that life to come too.

When you hear messages from God like this one today they're meant to melt away your fears and bring you hope. In our Gospel reading John the Baptist was in prison looking for hope, and so he sent a message to Jesus asking for that hope, and Jesus tells him that what we read in this Old Testament message of hope was happening in Jesus' day – the eyes of the blind were being opened, the lame walked, the deaf heard and mute people were singing for joy.

Jesus has taken on Satan by force. What Satan tries to claim from your life, Jesus claims back. Sure, there'll still be times when we're afraid. Life isn't always going to be easy just because we're Christians. Yet in the midst of those times you can still celebrate the joys of Christmas because you know that God is still working in the world. Every trial can be a source for joy because we know and trust that God will work some good out of that hardship. Our sorrows and sighings of this life will flee away in the eternal joys of heaven, which our reading also gives us a glimpse into. We don't yet see what this heaven will be like, but by faith we trust in our God who sent Jesus to save us, that He will save us into eternal life when our time comes. Even if our understanding of what God says to us is limited like a fool, He won't let us faithful fools go astray from Him. Amen.