

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

FEAR-LESS

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Chris Repp

Say 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."

5Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7the 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.

Note: See also Marcus Felde's crossing of the broader surrounding passage, Isaiah 35:1-10, back on the Third Sunday of Advent in the current church year (<https://crossings.org/theology/2014/theolo995old.shtml>).

DIAGNOSIS: Something to Fear

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Blind and Deaf*

Blindness and deafness (to say nothing of lameness and muteness) are surely serious physical conditions that limit an

individual's experience of the world and ability to interact with others. How much more serious, then, is the case of a whole nation blind to the reality of the world and deaf to God's calling? ("Do not fear the enemies who threaten you! Trust me instead to protect you.") Isaiah sets up a clear contrast: trust God, or trust the ways of the world.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Afraid (of the Wrong Things)*

We are deaf to God and blind to the true nature of the world and its false promises because we are afraid. Our fear, our love, and our trust are misdirected. We fear all perceived threats to our security. We love those who promise to protect us. We trust in the strength of armies and unmanned drones, in violence and the threat of violence as the solutions to our problems. We love and trust in wealth and beauty and reputation.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Terrible Recompense*

In our impaired state we fail to appreciate our real predicament. In our preoccupation with the routine enemies of our daily existence we have not noticed that we have actually been chasing after other gods, and that in doing so we have run afoul of the One who really is to be feared. That is to say we have made God our enemy. And so we blithely grope our way to our doom.

PROGNOSIS: Fearless

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Happy Recompense (Sweet Swap)*

When all would be otherwise lost, into the wilderness* of our doomed existence God sends God's Word*. And that Word, John the Evangelist tells us, also shines light into our darkness. Through this Word (the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ), God takes upon God's self the consequences of our blind folly on the cross, and in exchange we are given the status of reconciled,

beloved children and heirs.

*As Frederick Niedner has pointed out, the Hebrew word for wilderness (midbar) can be understood to mean the “place beyond or without words.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Nothing to Fear*
Having been thus reconciled with God, our hearts are turned to the light by the power of the Holy Spirit. The water of Holy Baptism breaks forth into our personal wildernesses, and we are Wordless no more. We begin to see and to hear, and to fear, love, and trust God alone. At the same time, the promises of this world are exposed for the shadows and illusions that they really are, and we rightly shun them.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Perceptive and Responsive*

With eyes and ears wide open, and with hearts fixed on God in Jesus Christ, we leap into the haunts of jackals, and worse. Now we are able to see beyond our old, distracting fears, looking beyond ourselves and into the world God loves. Our tongues are loosed, and we fearlessly sing the Word into all the wordless wildernesses we encounter.