

Ben Libby

Sermon

February 7th. Sexagesima Sunday

In the name of Jesus Christ, who came to redeem us from our sins so that we might become the children of God, Dear fellow Redeemed... Our sermon text this morning is taken from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 25, the first 5 verses.

O LORD, you are my God. I will exalt you! I will praise your name, because you have done astounding things, plans laid long ago that are firm and faithful. 2 For you have reduced the city to a heap, the fortified city to ruins. The citadel of foreigners is no longer a city at all. It will never be rebuilt. 3 That is why powerful peoples will honor you. The cities of cruel nations will fear you, 4 for you have been a stronghold for the poor, a stronghold for the needy in their distress. You have been a shelter from the rainstorm and shade from the heat. When the breath of the ruthless is like a rainstorm battering a wall, 5 like a hot wind drying up the desert, you put down the uproar of foreigners. It is like heat cooled by the shade of a cloud. The song of the ruthless is silenced...

This is the Word of The LORD!!! The congregation may be seated...

Mercy, Grace, and peace are yours through your God and Father, and through His Son, Jesus Christ, true God and Man, dear fellow Sons and Daughters of the King...

How do you react to fear? Fear is something that every person has to deal with. To some, it visits occasionally. To others, it is a constant companion. And yet, no matter who you are, no matter how young or old, rich or poor, you will encounter fear. So, how do you react to it?

How someone deals with fear is actually a good barometer of how good someone is at life in general. It's quite a remarkable ability to be able to be completely and totally gripped by fear and still be able to move and function through it. But at the same time, fear can also be a good thing. It is this emotion that we have that makes us acutely aware of possible danger.

Wouldn't it be great if we never had to experience fear ever again? Well, how great would that actually be? Sure, there would be some advantages to that. We would be much bolder than we typically are and it would be a lot easier to take some necessary risks. But, we would also be much more susceptible to harm and threats without that emotional warning reaction.

When it comes to fear, you shouldn't live trying to avoid it at all costs. Rather, you should learn how to control it instead of letting it control you. Desiring to live a life free from fear is A. impossible and B. would

probably just turn you into a recluse. You don't want to live IN fear, and you really can't live WITHOUT fear. Rather we need to be able to live WITH fear.

One of the best ways to react to living with fear is to do what Isaiah does here, "Praise the LORD!" Praising the LORD might be one of the hardest things to do in the face of fear, but it is the most effective way to deal with it. If you boil down fear to its essence, it is an uneasiness to the unknown. Praising God is the opposite of giving in to fear. It is saying, "God you are great, and no matter what is happening to me, I know you're in control".

This morning we will consider the theme, Praise the LORD, our Powerful Protector. Indeed the LORD is praiseworthy, for He humbles and exalts. Indeed, the LORD is Powerful, for He commands respect. And indeed, the LORD is our protector, for He shelters us from all the elements! And so, we pray, MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATIONS OF OUR HEARTS BE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR SIGHT O GOD, OUR ROCK AND OUR REDEEMER, AMEN...

In our section, Isaiah first starts off by talking about what God does in the here and now. What God does

in the present is based on what He did a long time ago: **O LORD, you are my God. I will exalt you! I will praise your name, because you have done astounding things, plans laid long ago that are firm and faithful.**

Isaiah says that He will “exalt” the LORD. But how is that possible? After all, isn’t He the most-high God? How can anyone say anything to exalt the most-high LORD?

Well, the next thought is how. He says **I will exalt you! I will praise your name.** This topic makes me think about the first petition, when we pray, “Hallowed be Thy name.” In our catechism, when Luther asks, “What does this mean?” he answers, “God’s name is certainly holy all by itself, but we pray in this petition that we also keep it holy.”

I think the words of Isaiah here can be interrupted in the same kind of light. God is exalted and His name is already praiseworthy. But we can both exalt Him and praise His name by living a godly life, worshipping Him, and trusting in His Word.

He continues: **because you have done astounding things, plans laid long ago that are firm and faithful.** Truly, our God has done ASTOUNDING things. These plans were not just made on the fly. They were planned out long ago, and these plans are firm and faithful.

One such astounding thing that the prophet here is talking about comes from the rest of the text. The text really contrasts the fortifications of the proud and mighty to the stronghold of the low and lowly.

Perhaps you may have thought of a specific example when Isaiah says: **For you have reduced the city to a heap, the fortified city to ruins.** Scripture is full of examples of great cities that prided themselves on their defenses or size. Cities that thought they were indestructible, only to be completely and totally annihilated. Many commentators think Isaiah is talking about Babylon here, but the specific city is not named.

What other cities could be referenced here? Sodom and Gomorrah? Tyre and Sidon? Nineveh the capital city of Assyria? The fortified city of Jerico? The nation of Edom? Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, the

cities that Jesus pronounced woe upon? There were so many cities that thought this way that ended up having to be excavated to even verify they had existed.

The point of all of these examples is that the exalted God humbles the proud. You could go through all those examples in depth. But the through-line with all of them was that they trusted in their own power and strength rather than listening to what God told them.

It’s a lesson that needs to be learned nationally as much as individually. We can all become humbled by a number of things. But the ultimate humbling factor is the Word. We too can fortify ourselves, build up spiritual walls to insulate the proud heart that resides in all of us. The only way to be lowly and humble is to repent of our sins. We need to tear down our walls and our wills to see what God’s will is for us. If we submit to the Word, then the King of Glory will come in. If we don’t, then the King of Glory will kick them down in judgment. As the Psalm says, **The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart-- These, O God, You will not despise. (Psa 51:17 NKJ)**

Yes, we need to humble ourselves before the most-high God. Your attitude towards Him when it comes to repentance and faith is the difference in what the fear of the LORD means on a personal level: **3 That is why powerful peoples will honor you. The cities of cruel nations will fear you**

What is the difference between “demanding respect” and “commanding respect”? They may seem to be quite similar, but they are very different. If you demand respect, you are making a claim that you ought to be respected. Perhaps a birthright, a supposed superiority, or a perceived slight might cause someone to demand respect from someone else. But commanding respect is different. You’re not respected because you think you ought to be. You are respected based on what you do. You are respected because you must be.

They say that respect is earned. That is, you are respected based on what you say and do. If you say and do nonsense, you will not be respected. But, if

you speak and do honorably, then you will be respected. At least, you should be.

The LORD truly doesn't just demand respect, He commands it! He absolutely commands respect, whether people acknowledge it or not. That is the difference between what kind of fear people will feel towards Him. Here Isaiah compares powerful peoples and cruel nations. What is the difference between the two groups? **POWERFUL peoples will HONOR you. The cities of CRUEL NATIONS will FEAR you**

In the Law, we are instructed to "Fear and Love God." Does that mean that we, His children, should be afraid of God? Well, yes, but not in the most common use of the word "fear". That is, we should revere God, honor Him, respect Him. If you believe and depend on God, then you should "honor" Him. If you don't believe and trust in God, then you should truly be afraid!

Who does Jesus say that we need to be afraid of? **Matthew 10:28 "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.** Many people think that Jesus is talking about the Devil here But that is not really the case. Hell was created by God to punish Satan! It destroys based off unrighteousness. It is God and God alone who has the power to destroy. Jesus is saying here fear God rather than man, because truly God is far more powerful and therefore commands the utmost respect.

And yet, even though it is only God alone who has the power to destroy, temporally and eternally, His destructive power does not define Him. His creative power does! He created everything, including us and our families. He has created new life within us, by His means of grace. He is defined by His steadfast love. He is defined by the very same reasons Isaiah praises Him here, He has **done astounding things, plans laid long ago that are firm and faithful.** He is not defined by His anger, rather by His mercy, passing over His anger. He is defined by His almighty power. Not just His power to judge guilty sinners, but also His power to forgive them their sins through the power of His gospel, the power of His love.

The LORD commands respect and we are made respectable through Him. We become a powerful

people because we are His people. He gives us strength and He is our strength. **I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies. (Psa 18:3 NKJ)** He is strong to save, and has indeed saved us. That's why He's worthy of our praise, and we will Praise the LORD.

And yet, even though we are saved and made powerful by the LORD, we still live with fear. The inferior enemies of the LORD will always cause those who trust in Him to be afraid. That's what they do. We know that we have no real reason to be afraid, and yet we are. If they can make us afraid, then they can get us to focus on fear instead of focusing on Him. Satan knows this, and has been using this tactic since time began.

But the reality is that as terrifying as that fear may be, that's really all they have. When it comes to the threats of our spiritual enemies, we really have nothing to fear but fear itself. Isaiah goes on: **You have been a shelter from the rainstorm and shade from the heat. When the breath of the ruthless is like a rainstorm battering a wall, 5 like a hot wind drying up the desert, you put down the uproar of foreigners.**

Are you afraid of rain? Well, if you are, Western Washington really isn't the place for you. We get more rain here than almost any other place in our country. But that's a ridiculous question, isn't it? After all, who is really that afraid of rain? They say, "a little rain never killed anyone". It's just water drops... Who would fear rain?

I can admit, I have been afraid of rain. There is so much of it here, and if you don't have a reliable roof, rain can be a constant terror. Before we replaced the roof on the parsonage, when it would rain hard, I would get that nagging sense of fear. What if this is the night when water actually starts pouring into my house? I've always taken the roof over my head for granted. But you stop doing that when that roof becomes unreliable.

But now, rain isn't that big of a concern anymore. We replaced that old, unreliable roof with a new one. Now, rain is just rain. It will be kept out and it will pass.

That is really what the threats we face in this life are. They are an intimidating storm, but they are fleeting. As Isaiah puts it here, those threats are **like a rainstorm battering a wall, like a hot wind drying up the desert, and like heat cooled by the shade of a cloud**. Rain may batter a wall, but ultimately it doesn't do much. Or like a hot wind in the desert. What effect does that really have? None. Whatever fears we face in this world truly have no power.

But how can I say this? This is the part when you say, "But Pastor, you don't know! You aren't going through what I am going through. You don't know how terrifying the things I am facing are!" And of course, you would be right. I cannot possibly know what terrors each one of you are facing. But that doesn't mean that I'm wrong.

Have you ever left something outside by accident? What happens to something that is repeatedly exposed to the elements? It gets broken down. Between the wind, the rain, and cold and the heat, things don't last. I guess it would depend on the object. But even with more solid things, eventually they break down also.

The elements of this world break us down as well. They are constantly threatening to dissolve us. A death of a loved one. A troublesome marriage. A prolonged period of unemployment. A contentious relationship with a coworker. All these things wear us down. How can I say that there is no real power behind these fearful things?

Well I can say that because of the reliability of our shelter. Our God is the mightiest of fortresses. The winds and the rain come up against us and surely we feel it. But when we reside in the stronghold of the LORD, there is nothing that we really need to be afraid of. No matter what happens to us, we are safely secured in the fact that Jesus has paid for our sins. What if I come back from the doctor with the worst news? So what? I am going to heaven. It may be sooner than I expect, but it is much better to be with the LORD than suffering here. What is your biggest

fear? What if that happens? So what? It may hurt, but ultimately you are a child of God and will be with Him in Paradise. We confidently sing along with the Psalmist: **The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? (Psa 118:6 NKJ)**

A good way to gauge how one does in life is how one deals with fear. We will all be afraid. But how do we approach fear? Should we live in a way that prevents fear from ever happening? No, that's impossible, especially if you are going to preach the gospel to all nations. Should we live in constant fear? No, that would also not be a very productive life. The only way to live in this world is to live WITH fear. Acknowledge the things that make you afraid. Admit that you are afraid. Then turn to the LORD. He is the reason we are able to live with fear, because He has promised us a future where fear is a distant memory. Here we live with fear. There we will just live with HIM! Isaiah's contemporary prophesied about that day: **But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, And no one shall make them afraid; For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. (Mic 4:4 NKJ)**

Therefore, let us praise our LORD! He has done astounding things, and they are firm and faithful. He is exalted and He exalts us. He commands respect and makes us respectable. He preserves us from all the elements of the world. Dear Christians, praise the LORD, our Powerful Protector! AMEN!