

# Be Strong, Do Not Fear!

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-6; James 5:7-10

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin with a few words about our upcoming Faith Questions series in the new year.

Nearly every Sunday, I get to decide what scriptures and topics will be covered during worship. Inevitably, I tend to bring my own questions and concerns and interests to the text each week.

But my questions are not always your questions.

So, a few years ago, our worship committee thought, “What if we take some time in the early part of the year to have a sermon series based on questions from the congregation?”

This series will begin January 17 and proceed until the beginning of Lent (with an exception for my quarterly Sunday away).

You can submit a question of faith you’ve wondered about *or* a text/story from Scripture that you feel has been neglected. One of the downfalls of mostly adhering to the Revised Common Lectionary, as we do, is that there are many texts that we simply never hear.

I can’t promise that I will address every question or passage. We have decided to devote five Sundays in January/February to this series.

Also, if the question is too hard, I reserve the right to ignore it 😊 (Just kidding. Kind of).

You can submit your questions either in the box at the back, if you wish to remain anonymous, or send me an email.

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On this third Sunday of Advent, I want to begin with what philosophers call a “thought experiment.” I’ve used it before, but it’s been over half a decade, so I think it’s probably safe. 😊

I want you to imagine that you have been blindfolded and led to a room. Your blindfold is taken off and you have a look around.

You see a medium sized room—roughly four meters by four meters. You see a single bed off to one side with a night table and a lamp on it, as well as a few books. You see a small brown desk off to the other side with a simple wooden chair in front of it. There is a medium-sized TV and a remote control, along with a card indicating how to access Wi-Fi services.

Off to the side, you see a bathroom with a sink, a toilet, a shower. You see a tacky painting on one wall opposite a window that looks out on to the street a few meters below. Above the bed is a simple light and a fan.

Do you have this picture in your mind?

Now, I want half of you to imagine that, prior to being blindfolded, you were told that you were about to be taken to a luxury hotel for a lavish New Year’s celebration.

How are you feeling right about now?

A single bed?! No Jacuzzi?! A small and not very luxurious room?!

You’re disappointed, right?

I want the other half of you to imagine that you had been traveling in a foreign country and, prior to being blindfolded you were arrested because your passport was missing a page and told that you were going to be taken to a prison cell.

How are you feeling?

There’s Wi-Fi access which promises the ability to alert others to your plight! There’s a bed and a window to the outside world! This is unimaginable luxury!

It is the same room in both cases, right? Yet some of you feeling miserable right now while others are elated.

The difference, obviously, is expectations. What we expect *shapes*, possibly in some cases even *determines* what and how we see.

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I want to move to another room, another set of expectations.

John the Baptist is in prison. He has been there since the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee.

It seems King Herod took exception to John's fiery preaching about "The one who is to come" and *really* didn't appreciate it when John denounced him for marrying his brother's ex-wife (Mat 14:3-12).

So, John's been sitting in his cell for a long time now, and he's heard rumours and whispers of what this Jesus has been doing all over the countryside. He has been healing, preaching, teaching, and generally causing quite a bit of a stir.

John is intrigued. But he's also a little disappointed. Or, at least confused.

He had been expecting a fiery Messiah to come up and execute judgment on Israel's corrupt leaders. He had probably even been expecting Israel's liberator to confront the power of Rome and overthrow Rome's puppet king Herod.

He had been expecting a glorious king!

Our family has a tradition of watching *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy every year around Christmastime. We just started yesterday.

For those who are familiar with the films, the third one —*The Return of the King*—is characterized by a massive, climactic battle scene where Aragorn, the rightful king of the city of Gondor, returns to liberate it from a corrupt king and the threat of the evil Sauron. It's a glorious scene of victory!

Perhaps John was expecting something like this. Perhaps he was expecting this Jesus to do what Israel's Messiah was *supposed* to do: come in with a flourish, mobilize an army, set Israel free, judge and defeat her enemies, and put all things right.

Remember, this is the same John who had this to say about the one who he was preparing the way for:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Mat. 3:12).

John clearly expected the Messiah to clean house!

But John is still in jail. Herod is still ruling with an iron fist. His people, the Jews, are still led by religious leaders who are corrupt and governed by self-interest. And Rome is still the ominous threat that hung over all of the known world.

And so, John's confused. He wants to know what's going on. This wasn't what he expected.

Debie Thomas puts it like this:

John is in chains and in crisis, wondering if he has staked his life on the wrong promise and the wrong person. The Messiah, as far as John can tell, has changed nothing. He was supposed to make the world new. He was supposed to bring justice, fairness, and order to human institutions. He was supposed to finish the costly work John started so boldly in the wilderness—to wield the axe, bring the fire, and renew the world.<sup>1</sup>

So, John asks his followers to go and ask this Jesus plainly, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

*If you're not going to do what needs doing, just let us know so we will save our hopes for someone else!*

And Jesus responds enigmatically as Jesus so often does.

He doesn't say, “Well, yes, John, I am the one who is to come, and if you'll just be a bit more patient, you'll see. I'm not going to be exactly what you're expecting, but just hang on and you'll see that I'm a pretty decent Messiah after all!”

No, he appeals to John's followers themselves. *Go tell John what **you** hear and see.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2479>

The blind receive their sight (Mat. 9:27-30).

The lame walk (Mat. 9:2-8).

The lepers are cleansed (Mat 8:1-4).

The deaf hear (Mat. 4:23-25).

The dead are raised (Mat 9:18-26).

Good news is proclaimed to the poor (Mat. 5:1-12).

Instead of calling to memory texts of judgment and final victory over Israel's enemies (which also exist in Isaiah 35), Jesus directs them to these signs of the kingdom:

- "The lame shall leap like a deer" (Isa. 35:6)
- "The eyes of the blind shall be opened (Isa. 35:5)
- "The ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Isa. 35:5)
- "The tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy" (Isa. 35:6)

What Jesus is saying to John is quite simple. The scriptures *are* being fulfilled in me, but the script will not be unfolding exactly as you imagined.

*Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me!*

Don't be embarrassed or disappointed because I'm not meeting your expectations in the way that you imagined that they ought to be. Don't be surprised when God's ways turn out to be different than yours.

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Ok. So far so good. Most of us have been through enough Advents and Christmases by this point to be reasonably well-acquainted with the Jesus who comes in unexpected ways, the Jesus who meets the hopes and fears of all the years in a way that nobody quite imagined.

We get it. Or, at least, we're *getting* it.

We perhaps don't require much further convincing that Jesus and his kingdom upended expectations of what a Messiah was supposed to look like.

Maybe, on this Third Sunday of Advent 2019, we're pondering different expectations.

Maybe we're wondering more along the lines of, "So, about those deserts rejoicing and blossoming... about the lame leaping and the blind seeing and deaf hearing... about that sorrow sighing and fleeing away that you mentioned to John's disciples..."

Well, not to be impolite, Jesus, but we're not seeing a whole lot of that. So, you know... Any time now would be great, if you don't mind?"

We're not expecting a military Messiah to take out Rome. We've taken Jesus at his word. We know that our king comes in peace. We believe that his coming promised a hope far more universal than this!

We're expecting the Jesus who promises to heal every wound and wipe away every tear.

It's been almost a year since my grandmother died in a tragic fire in her apartment. As some of you may remember, I spoke at her funeral, and in my devotional, I shared a few examples of the emails that she would send her extended family every day.

One of them came to mind this week. I had written a blog post on how our Christmas songs contain some of our best theology. My grandma emailed me the following in response:

And about leaving out stanzas in... Hymn Books: In the carol, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" the 3rd stanza is omitted in the newer books. Yet in 2009, when your Grandpa was in the hospital during the whole Christmas season, when for weeks on end I drove to Lethbridge several times a day, much of the time on very treacherous roads, to be with him, knowing that he was dying, it was that 3rd stanza (especially the last line) that so encouraged me. It says: "O ye, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way, with painful steps and slow, Look up! For glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing, O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing." Even now, whenever we sing that carol, I'm sorry the third verse is left out.

I thought of this email because I know that there those among us who are experiencing "life's crushing load" right now, "whose forms are bending low" with "painful steps and slow."

I know that there are those among us whose hands feel weak and whose knees feel feeble, those who are struggling, as Christmas approaches.

There are some who are watching loved ones suffer, or with the indignities and inconveniences of aging, or with the pain of fractured relationships, or with isolation and loneliness, or with general despair at the state of the world.

I know that there are those among us this morning who are struggling right now to believe that anything like Isaiah's vision or Jesus' fulfillment of it really *are* in their future.

It's been a long year, for some, and there doesn't seem to be much hope on the horizon.

I know all of this because you've told me.

One of the gifts and burdens of pastoral ministry is that I am invited into the pain of everyday lives. So I can't hear texts like this morning's as theological abstractions. I can't help but hear them through your ears.

And to all of us, perhaps the word of the Lord today comes from our reading from James.

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

We know that patience is a virtue worth cultivating. We know that patience is, in many ways, one of the primary expressions of faith in this time between Christ's advents.

But we are naturally impatient. I am, at any rate. I want the harvest now, because we need this crop. God, how we need it.

I sometimes think that God and I are operating with different understandings of what the word "near" means. *How long can you keep asking us to be patient?*

I spoke at my *other* grandma's funeral six months earlier. We had talked about her funeral before she died and the scripture passage she chose was Romans 8:37-39:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The powerful hope of the gospel is that even in the midst of all that we endure while we wait, there is nothing that can finally separate us from the love of God. Nothing.

Not one of the doubts or fears whose dark clouds we daily live under can pose a final threat to the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It can sound really trite to say, "Be patient, Christ is coming; His love is bigger than all that life threatens to steal." But what if it were true?

What if it were really true that the final word upon all of our stories was the most powerful and determined love imaginable?

What if it were true that *nothing* we go through in this life can separate us from the love of all loves, the light of all lights?

What if it were true that the One who gave his life for ours, binding himself to us and us to him, promised that the final word on all our stories is not frustrated expectation but unity and embrace?

What if *this* is what (or who) we expected? What would we see? How would we interpret our trials in this time of waiting? What signs of healing might our eyes and ears be attuned to?

*Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord...Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near (James 5:7,8).*

*Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God (Isaiah 35:4).*

Amen.



