

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

February 19, 2017

“A Godly Hold Up”

Whom Shall I Fear? part 2

Isaiah 41:8-16

Psalm 118:24 says, “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” If you are rejoicing this morning, I am glad. But even if you’re not, let me remind you that you are in the right place. You are not here by accident. We come together every Sunday not only to worship the Lord Jesus Christ; we also come to encourage each other. That’s why we sing and pray and give and preach. Because we believe God has a message of life-change that is for everyone.

Would you pray with me? Lord Jesus, thank you for being who you are. Awesome. Mighty. Powerful. Merciful. More than we can imagine. As we worship you today, bring the full message of your salvation to our hearts. Let us know that when we trust in you, we have nothing to fear. And we will follow you and proclaim your goodness to the whole world. Be with us in this holy moment now. We pray this in your name and for you sake. Amen.

Last week we began a series on overcoming fear. I gave you a memory verse, and we are going to practice it again today. This time, we get to do the full verse. Say it with me.

Psalm 27:1 “The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?”

[Image: hand holding a new born baby]

How many of you have ever taken a photo like this with one of your children or grandchildren? As a parent, you are always amazed at how perfectly

tiny your children's hands can be. But consider the other perspective. How huge must your hands be to them! I used to tell my kids to put their hands in mine. Then I'd say, "Which one is bigger? Which one would hurt more if it spanked? Mine? OK, so let's not do anything that makes me want to spank you!" (Disclaimer: I'm not saying this trick actually worked.) Still, the idea of a parent with strong hands is normally a comforting one.

Strength is desirable in many ways. Imagine trying to play a sport – football, basketball, whatever. When you choose teams – do you want the scrawny, bean-pole guy with tiny hands? (That was me, by the way.) Or the guy who can bench-press 400 pounds and crush walnuts with his fingers? We want the strong man (or the strong woman) on our side!

We equate strength with victory, safety and security. When we are afraid, we want to be rescued by someone strong. When things are out of control, we want someone to step in and save the day. Think about our fascination with cartoon heroes. Or self-help books and talk shows. We believe that someone somewhere has the answer to our problems. One of my favorite shows on HGTV is "Holmes on Homes" because not only can this home improvement guy, Mike, do anything, he's huge and strong!

But what if we are stuck in circumstances that can't be solved by mere human strength? What if we think we have to save ourselves, and we feel that we aren't strong enough, our hands aren't big enough to deal with our problem? Wouldn't it be great to know that it's not your strength that matters, but God's?

Some problems go way beyond lifting heavy objects into place. Imagine that you were taken from your homes; made to serve in some other country as a slave. Imagine not speaking your native language, not being able to worship your

God, not being able to eat your own food. I lived in Germany for a year, but that was by my own choice. What I am describing to you is the reality that the Israelites faced in exile when Isaiah was written.

For a small country in a backwater part of the world, Israel sure enjoyed their fair share of enemies. It seems like for most of their history, someone was always attacking, conquering, or picking a fight with someone else over this small county on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. Some people say the same is still true today.

At one point in their history, Israel was divided into two kingdoms, north and south. Assyria came in and conquered the northern part, leaving only Judah behind. And just when Judah thought things were safe, Babylon came in and took the rest of them as slaves. The Hebrews had one thought: God had abandoned them to exile.

But the prophet Isaiah had a different view. He had words of encouragement to offer the exiles. Let's look at them together, starting with the first two verses. (Isaiah 41:8-9)

⁸*"But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
you descendants of Abraham my friend,
⁹I took you from the ends of the earth,
from its farthest corners I called you.
I said, 'You are my servant';
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.*

What's the number one thing to do when we are down and afraid?

"Remember God's promises." That's where Isaiah starts. He recalls what God did in the past. God chose Abraham and made him into a mighty nation. He chose Jacob, the "cheater", and made him into Israel, a name which means "God prevails". Isaiah knew God's people were scattered, disorganized, and lost. Yet God took them "from the ends of the earth" – as far away as you could imagine, and brought them back together. Look at verse 9. "I have chosen you and have not rejected you." God could have rejected them. The Bible teaches that the Israelites were exiled because they stopped worshipping God and started worshipping idols. (2 Chronicles 36:14-17) So they feared their exile was the ultimate rejection from God. But Isaiah was telling them, "No. Not so. God still loves you. He still chooses you."

And then Isaiah gives them this command. (41:10)

¹⁰*"So do not fear, for I am with you;*

do not be dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you;

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

The word "righteous" can also be translated as victorious or saving. The AMP Bible calls it a hand of "justice and power". In other words, the prophet was telling the people – "Even though you are defeated in the moment, God has the ultimate victory. God has the strong hand."

This is something we should be telling our friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, and family every day! We might be defeated in the moment, but God has not rejected us! Yes, there are consequences for our actions. Yes, there are

bad days, bad decisions, and bad moods, but God does not turn his back on you, even if you turn your back on him!

God strengthens us and helps us, because God's power, not our own, is what matters. We are human, we are weak. But God is strong.

Isaiah goes on to talk about what happens to our enemies when God defends us. (41:11-12)

¹¹*"All who rage against you
will surely be ashamed and disgraced;
those who oppose you
will be as nothing and perish.*

¹²*Though you search for your enemies,
you will not find them.*

*Those who wage war against you
will be as nothing at all.*

Can you imagine living in a place where you never had any enemies? Can you imagine looking for trouble and never finding it, while living in a land filled with your oppressors? It seems crazy. The Jews were battle scarred. They had failed. They had been beaten. But God promised to remove all their opposition. And then God repeats his command. (41:13)

¹³*For I am the LORD your God
who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.*

God takes our hand. He says, "Do not fear. I will help you." Those are powerful words that should be in everyone's vocabulary.

A few years ago, I went to a ministry conference, and they taught us a question every leader should ask: “How can I help you?” Anytime anyone calls or stops by your office: “How can I help you?” I’m just a pastor. I’m an ordinary guy who happens to be brave enough, or crazy enough, to stand on this side of the pulpit. Yet God is saying every moment of every day, “I will help you”! Not, “Can I help you?” “I will help you.” That is powerful and we need to remember it.

God’s third promise wraps this section up. (41:14-16a)

¹⁴*Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob,
little Israel, do not fear,
for I myself will help you,” declares the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.*

¹⁵*“See, I will make you into a threshing sledge,
new and sharp, with many teeth.
You will thresh the mountains and crush them,
and reduce the hills to chaff.*

¹⁶*You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up,
and a gale will blow them away.*

I think God is using a little holy humor here. He says, “Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob; little Israel, do not fear.” Compared to God, we are all worms: little, insignificant, unable to defend ourselves. To call someone a worm – that’s pretty low. I mean, worms do have some redeeming qualities – when you are going fishing! But aside from that and helping you compost your garden, worms are not so great.

God knows that Israel is weak. God knows that we are weak. And that’s OK. The transformation God promises is awesome.

God will make them in a threshing sledge – what is that? *[Pictures]* It's a heavy piece of equipment that you drive over the wheat to separate the grain from the straw. In modern terms, it would be a combine harvester. Let me tell you, when these babies get going, they are awesome! I used to play in my grandfather's farm, and even when the combine was just sitting in the garage quietly, I didn't want to get anywhere near those teeth! They were huge and scary.

God tells Israel that they will become a combine that threshes mountains, crushes rocks to dust, and tears hills apart. This is like a transformation from a little plastic rake that a child uses at the beach to play in the sand, to a massive, powerful machine that has no equal.

But here's the thing. This is not about a power trip for Israel. It is not about Israel bulking up and working out. This passage is about encouragement. And Isaiah is clear about the "who, what and why" of this transformation. Look at the final part of verse 16. (41:16b)

But you will rejoice in the LORD, and glory in the Holy One of Israel.

They are not going to boast in their own strength. They are not going to gloat in their victories and sense of security. Israel is going to rest secure in one thought: God, and God alone, is their strong savior.

This is a really good promise. Israel had felt rejected through the exile. God promised them strength. He chose them, loved them. He would reduce their enemies to nothing. This is a message of pure hope.

But when you're getting beat up on all sides, it's hard to imagine your enemies disintegrating. **It's hard to believe in the midst of difficult circumstances that God is lifting you up. But it's true.**

I know in my life, I've felt beaten up. Usually it has been when I took my eyes off of God's promises and started dwelling too much on my own situation. God was patient with me, and by the time I finally got around to reconnecting with my Creator, I could see that God had been supporting me with his righteous right hand the whole time. I just never acknowledged it.

I realize this message isn't for everyone. You might not be fearful for anything right now. And that's OK. You are blessed. But that also means you have the responsibility to share this good word with someone who is afraid. There is someone out there whose world is falling apart right now, someone near you. And you can offer them hope straight from God.

But if you are in that "exile" right now, this message is really for you. There is hope. I am just one witness to it. I have trusted in the mercy of Jesus Christ to save my soul and give me something, right here and right now, worth living for. In spite of fears, in spite of circumstances, I have learned to trust him. You have that opportunity, too.

Your hands might not be that big. They may not be that strong. It doesn't matter, because God is the one who holds you up, and his hands are the strongest.

Memory verse

Psalm 27:1

"The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?"

Reflection questions

1. Who has the strongest hands you know? How do they use them to help others?

2. When times are rough, how does the image of God's hands supporting you give you strength?
3. Who do you know that could you a word of encourage and strength? How will you give that to them?