

July 19, 2020

[Series – Fear Not: Finding Courage in an Anxious World]

[Sermon – Fear Not: Look Forward]

[Isaiah 35:1-10, 43:1-10, 16-21](#)

"Looking Forward" to a future joyful experience can help get us through hard work and tough stuff. Being able to see something on the horizon that you know will be beautiful (or at least can picture as beautiful) is often a great motivating factor when we're up to our necks in the mud and mire. I'm not sure about this being true in all cases, but sometimes a treat or celebration or reward up ahead can even get us to focus less on what it is we're anxious and fearful of in the moment. How does Looking Forward help us get over/through what causes us frustration, anxiety and fear? How does Looking forward keep us from giving up or getting stuck?

These are some very petty, middle-class American examples:

- The vacation at the end of the month gets us through the big push at work
- Knowing you will treat yourself to dinner, ice cream or BOGO at Starbucks . . .
. . . once you send taxes in, once you clean the house, once you pay the bills, etc.
- A date night at the end of a long week, with your favorite babysitter lined up by Monday

These are NOT petty things we Look Forward to that help us get through anxious, fearful times:

- Having a grateful and responsible 19 year-old who gives you joy, while he/she is still 14
- The dream of owning your own business in the midst of significant job dissatisfaction
- A retirement full of travel, service, hobbies and rest even though it's 13 years away
- A peace-filled marriage on the other side of your conflict and counseling
- The joy of a new knee on the other side of surgery/rehab, while still in pain on this side
- Laughing hysterically with friends/family again while in the midst of depression
- Doctor says "It's working!" once your 10 weeks of chemo is over, in week #3

These are big things, beyond our own personal lives, that we (ALL) need to Look Forward To:

- Seeing everyone back in school classrooms, work offices and assisted living facilities
***To motivate through the current frustrations and sacrifices and annoyances
- Racial harmony matching MLK's "Dream" while we slog through hard truths and conversations
- No more gun violence while we address hard political issues and mental health realities connected to it

The Israelites are going through a difficult time. Joshua DID lead them into the Promised Land; but it wasn't only "a land flowing with milk and honey." It was also full of enemies and battles. But even when the people of God won the battles and settled the land (just as God promised would happen), they still had battles to fight: internal strife and besetting sins. Idolatry and compromise and a desire "to have kings like the other nations" led to ups and downs, invasion

and exile, Babylonians and Assyrians pushing them around. They are in the middle of a very hard season, fearful they will never get back to flourishing as a nation that is intimate with, obedient to, and blessed by God. They needed something to Look Forward to; to help them get past their fears.

So God, through Isaiah, creates a glorious vision of that something [to "Look Forward" to].

The imagery of this visionary promise in Isaiah 35 is multi-faceted; it's breathtaking. We see the flourishing of the natural world in which deserts go from dry and barren, to lush and blossomy; bodies go from broken to healed. God's presence is promised. His felt absence, Isaiah says, will be replaced by His glorious arrival. The Israelites are told their place of worship will go from destroyed to rebuilt; and the road to get there will be transformed – from a torn up and unsafe highway to a paved and peace-filled passageway, with no predators to scare them off or sin to set them back.

After the initial picture in Isaiah 35:1-2 of a land that is flourishing and the promise of seeing the glory and majesty of God, fearfulness is addressed head on: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God . . . He will come and save you.' " (Isaiah 35:3-4)

Everyone needs to hear that God is coming; and He is coming to save them. You and I need to hear that too. But how do people best hear that proclamation and get a glimpse of that truth in real life? They don't need more empty promises and pie-in-the-sky platitudes. They need to see that actual deserts (so to speak) are now being refreshed with abundant water; that blind people (so to speak) can now see; that a rote, going-through-the-motions kind of worship is now alive with the glory of God. They need something to Look Forward to if they are going to get past the pain and fear of their current reality. We ALL need that!

When International Justice Mission began over 20 years ago the picture was grim and the scope of global slavery was overwhelming. Not only did Gary Haugen have to start an organization from scratch, but he also had to butt heads with foreign government and police officials who looked the other way. He had to try and convince an unaware and somewhat apathetic American church that slavery was something they should care about, and invest in the fight against it. Back in the beginning, Gary and his small team Looked Forward to a little rescue here and there – or a breakthrough with a government official – to keep them going. And then they started to get a little traction with multiple rescues and a growing donor base and a contagious commitment to prayer. Their staff grew and their reputation as competent and helpful partners grew too. And the American Church started noticing more, and participating in meaningful ways. But the work was grueling and the evil was rampant and the stories were heartbreaking and the uphill battle was still very steep. They faced dark days and carried heavy burdens. But still, they Looked

Forward to the day when hundreds would be rescued: whether the rescues were on Lake Volta in Ghana or from the brick kilns and brothels of India. And they developed this vision of ending Global Slavery in our lifetime, so that what felt like dry and dusty deserts to millions of people year-in-and-year-out would become well-watered, blossoming places of redemption. And they keep going – even though there are still over 40 million people trapped in slavery.

And then, just a few weeks ago, there were rescues in a few brick kilns in India totaling several hundred people. That would be reason enough to celebrate wildly, although this is actually becoming a little more common in their work. What wasn't expected was that within 48 hours the legal authorities would contact over 30 other brick kiln owners and demand that they release all those enslaved (which ended up totaling 6,700 people) . . . AND they organized train rides and protection along the way so that these now-freed men, women and children could have safe passages all the way back home. All along, IJM has needed to hear the words of the prophet: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God . . . He will come and save you.'" (Isaiah 35:3-4) But it's not always so easy, is it?

Right after the glorious vision of Isaiah 35, King Sennacherib of Assyria comes and bullies the Israelites a little more. There are threats and teasing. King Hezekiah is a mess and Isaiah has to set him straight more than once. It doesn't look good at all . . . but the promises of God continue through the next few chapters in Isaiah. In chapter 40 the people are told "Do not fear." (Isaiah 40:9) Chapter 41 is full of "Fear Nots." (Isaiah 41:10, 13-14) And, throughout these chapters, there are images of deserts and barren wilderness becoming well-watered pools; blind people gaining their sight; justice being brought forth. Then we get to Isaiah 43 where we are invited to Look Forward to some of the same images and promises. And it starts like this: "Thus says the Lord, the One who created you, O Jacob, and the One who formed you, O Israel: 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . . when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned . . . Do not fear for I am with you.'" (Isaiah 43:1, 2, 5) And then, once again, God promises to make a way (Isaiah 43:16, 19) and bring His people home (Isaiah 43:5-7).

The imagery of water isn't quite as glowing in chapter 43. Waters will rise and fires will burn, but we do not need to be afraid because the Lord is with us, and He has given us something to Look Forward to that far outweighs the struggles we face and the fears we feel.

We have a different vantage point than the Israelites had when Isaiah prophesied to them. They had to, literally, Look Forward centuries into the future. But for us, we actually Look Back because all that imagery has been carried out through God's one and only Son. In Jesus, we look back and see that God kept all of His promises: of a Way home; of living water; of the blind regaining their sight and the lame leaping for joy. In Jesus, God did come to save us (Isaiah

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35:4). In Jesus, God has redeemed us and called us by name (Isaiah 43:1). It is already accomplished but not yet fully seen and experienced. But **IT IS COMING . . . His Kingdom is coming!** So don't be afraid. Fear Not!