

Be Strong, Do Not Fear, God Is Here

FINAL SERMON

Proper 17 b
Isaiah 35:4-7a

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Leave-takings and final sermons are a real mixed bag for most preachers, I hope you know. On the one hand, a preacher who's leaving generally has something to look forward to in a new stage of life, and so there is a natural amount of eagerness for that new stage to begin for that preacher.

On the other hand, there are all those good relationships that are being left behind when a pastor leaves a congregation – relationships that have been forged through joys and sorrows, struggles and accomplishments, trial and error, celebrations and losses for individuals and for the church. And the longer that ministry has lasted, the deeper those relationships are. Thus the mixed bag of leave-takings.

I remember one leave-taking in which a congregation presented me with a very large bottle of premium scotch. The president of the Council said, "We thought you'd need this after your three years with us!"

In fact, I DID need it after my three years with them! It was one of the most difficult situations I had ever worked with. But then that's the kind of ministry I've been called to – to work with difficult situations to try to move a congregation to a new and better place.

So in case you're wondering, I want to report unequivocally that I do NOT need a large bottle of scotch as I leave you today. While it certainly was the case as I came in that I certainly expected you to be another congregation like that one, you all instead proved to be wonderful partners in ministry. You were eager for a brighter future, and you were willing to do whatever it took to get there. A pastor could never wish for more. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for that.

That is not to say that the journey has not taken its toll, however. Which brings me to another point that I really need to make, because I hear there are rumors among you. No, I am not sick. And I am not hiding some terrible medical secret. I am simply tired. I'm also 74, which makes being tired a little more significant than when I was 64 or 54. Those of you in this age bracket know what I'm talking about.

I'm not the only one who is tired. I think this pandemic has been quite wearing on all of us, hasn't it? Connie Schmucker, who is with us today from the Bishop's office, will tell you that this pandemic has brought about a lot of pastors retiring early, pastors who are just plain tired and weary.

When all our congregations closed in the spring of 2020 and moved online for meetings and worship and church business, it put a new pressure on pastors that none of us had ever experienced before. It took extra effort to keep the ministry moving, extra effort to keep the people united, extra effort to keep whatever emphasis or program

moving forward, extra effort to stay in touch with people who you no longer saw on a regular basis. Even though pastors made these extra efforts from home while staying safe like the rest of us, the whole burden of a congregation weighed heavily on each pastor's shoulders as those pastors went to great lengths to learn new technologies, spent hours on the telephone just to stay connected with church members and ministry leaders, and spent hours in front of a computer in online meetings or preparing worship videos to feed the faithful.

I was your part-time pastor, but I remember telling many of you more than once, "There are no part-time pastors in a pandemic."

Even when churches were able to reopen this past spring, it became very apparent to most pastors that until the pandemic was finally gone entirely, ministries were simply NOT going to be able to get back to where they were. And now here we are with another surge and another shutdown of worship in many of our churches, including ours.

At the beginning of this summer as I looked toward the fall and an expectation that rebuilding following a pandemic was going to take a lot, I questioned whether I had the energy and wherewithal to do it. By the first of August, with the surge taking our state back down quite dramatically, I knew that I did NOT have the energy and wherewithal. I am tired. Not sick. Just lacking in what it takes to keep up with you.

But the good news is that we had accomplished all that I came here to help you accomplish before the pandemic hit. That pandemic only delayed the forming of a Call Committee for a little while, and they've now completed our profile and are ready to sharpen their skills for interviewing. Pastor Sharon Dorr starts Tuesday with lots of energy that I don't have, because she has not been serving a parish during the pandemic. And I know that she will capably lead you the rest of the way through your call process until the arrival of your full-time pastor.

So what good words can I say about all these things and about our four-plus years together? Indeed, what good words does God have to say, even as I have instructed you to always look for what God has to say in every situation?

You may remember my advice about paying attention to what jumps out at you. Well, something jumped out at me this week as I was preparing today's bulletin. What jumped out were those opening verses of our first reading from Isaiah. Let me read them again:

"Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.... He will come and save you'" (Is.35:4).

That's quite a word from God for this day, isn't it?

In many ways, I can't help but realize that these verses encapsulate what my entire ministry has been all about here. And not just here, but my WHOLE ministry, all 34 years of it.

I have always been sent into church situations in which I encounter people "who are of a fearful heart," as Isaiah describes them. Fearful and anxious and worried, and maybe even burned out and angry and bitter. I have always been sent into churches on the downside of their history, churches that are lost and uncertain about their future.

And the message that God has always given me to speak in every one of those churches has been this: "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.... He will come and save you." In fact, I would even be so bold as to say that every sermon that I have ever

preached, including all my sermons here at Holy Cross, have had that same message in it.

“Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.... He will come and save you.”

Notice the most important part. “Here is your God.” When we are fearful and down in the dumps and thinking bitter thoughts and struggling to get from day to day, we sometimes lose sight of the fact that God is right here with us, calling us to see him in our midst, calling for us to recognize him and listen to him – for our own good.

“Here is your God.” It’s the most important thing, because when we finally recognize God in our midst, we can stop being afraid. We can be strong and venture forth to try new things. If God is leading, we know it will be good for us. If God is leading and we are following, we know we will be blessed. “He WILL come and save you.”

“Here is your God.” That’s the message I came to you with. And how many times have we recognized God’s hand among us? How many times have we seen it and known that it was God in these four-plus years? In the rainbow. In the unifying of our congregation. In the rally around a new theme to “Grow Holy Cross.” In the blessing of pledges and tithes and a capital campaign. In the blessing of new members constantly coming in our doors. In the blessing of 50 years of history, with stories that have inspired us and encouraged us. How many times have we recognized God’s hand and been encouraged? And that encouragement goes on, right up to and including today.

“Here is your God.” It is the message I leave you with. Some of us may again be fearful. Pastoral changes quite naturally bring forth anxieties like that. You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t occasionally lapse into worry over changes in your life that you’d rather not make.

But thank God for Isaiah and his lesson for today – just to remind us. “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.... He will come and save you.”

You received that message from God when I brought it to you four years ago. You put your hope in that, and God did not let you down. Your hope and your faith that God is indeed here have been a blessing for you that was perhaps greater than you ever expected. So it will be with your future.

“Here is your God.” Right here. In this place. And in your hearts. Leading and guiding. Encouraging and lifting you up. Walking with you step by step to a future of his own making.

I may leave you, but God remains. God and his love for you remains.

Always put your hope and your faith in that. And you will continue to be blessed.