

Sermon on **Isaiah 51:4-6** for Last Sunday of the Church Year
St. Paul's Lutheran Church – New Ulm, MN – Pastor N. Scharf
11.24.24

Soon we will have a transfer of power within our government. Some people are happy, some sad, some anxious, some not sure. Whatever you're feeling, it pales in comparison to what God's people felt in Jerusalem and Judah. They were in the process of a change of government, at least an earthly change, and complete change. Due to Judah's disobedience, sin, arrogance, and idolatry, God finally said their time was up. He would allow the Babylonians to invade from the East and conquer Jerusalem, tear down its walls and bring down the temple of the LORD stone by stone. Many would die. The survivors would go into exile. God was determined, and his face was set against his people. What a hopeless predicament! But God in his mercy had a promise for those who held on to him in faith.

We may not know terror like they did, but we know the anxiety, the trouble we face, the crosses – the difficulties we have living as Christians in a world that is against Christ. But God in his mercy has a promise for you as you hold on to him in faith.

Live like you'll live forever. Live and Serve with your eyes on the skies.

- 1) **It won't be long.**
- 2) **God's Grace will last forever.**

“Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: Instruction will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.”

They were watching God's just judgment play out before them. How would this message of hope land on their ears? Sometimes it's hard to see past what is right in front of you. Whether it is in a time of temptation and the sinful nature sees what it wants and tries to take over our hearts to do something sinful or grab something not for us, or it is in a time of suffering where we are feeling the loss, the pressure, the hurt, the trauma and it wants to consume our hearts and minds.

You ever been bullied, or maybe bullied someone? They sadly can go hand in hand. Someone consistently seeking you out to cause you harm, intimidate you, and coerce you. They can make you feel helpless, even worthless. The devil, the world, our sinful nature, temptation, guilt and shame are all bullies. The minute we struggle or suffer they rush in and whisper or scream at us questioning our identity, our worth, our purpose and usefulness. When trials come even though we know they are permitted by the hand of a merciful God, the devil pours it on and says, “He doesn't love you.” “See, God never cared about you.” Nothing could be further from the truth, but our sinful nature listens and gives its assent. Each one of us knows and fears that our sin may be too much for God's mercy, or our trespass too great to ever be called back, our failure too egregious to think God could ever love us again. That bully within our hearts wants us to think we are worthless to God, or that he has turned his back on us. In our dark moments we agree. God's people in Judah must have felt that way. Maybe we do too.

God calls as if saying, “Don't listen to the bullies. Listen to me.” *“Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation.”* He reminds them and you that you still belong to him. Though he disciplines them, and they are feeling that rod on their backs, he still loves them. Those who seek him with repentant hearts (turning from sin and turning to him) he will not abandon. He calls them and you *“my people,” “my nation.”*

God has not turned his back on you. He helps you lift up your eyes over the bullies of sin, your sinful nature, the world which tries to put Christians and God's Word down. He lifted Judah's eyes above the Babylonians marching on the horizon. He promises: *“Instruction will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands look to me and wait in hope for my arm.”* His salvation is on the way. He's the one who owns it and brings it. The trials and suffering won't last. **It won't be long.** Jesus is coming soon with help and his final return.

Yes, God would bring his people back to Judah and Jerusalem after 70 years. He kept that promise. But Jerusalem would ultimately be conquered again by the Romans, and it continues to be squabbled over even today. What Isaiah records from the Lord here points to a greater promise and a greater fulfillment, not one that was just for the inhabitants of a certain city, but one that is for all people, even *“the islands,”* those far away. This *instruction*, this *salvation* was his and he was delivering it. Isaiah sees it as so close, almost there. God's

timing is perfect. Two chapters later we see how this would be accomplished, not by regaining the glory of a former nation or some earthly king, but by the King of Kings, the Son of God, taking on flesh and being born for the salvation of the world. Jesus Christ, the Servant God had promised would come and as Isaiah 53 shows clearly, *“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 53:5-6). This may not be what the people of Judah had expected the Messiah, the Savior, to do, but this is what they needed.

He is what we needed. It means that our sins, our failures, all the things that would truly make us worthless and unworthy of God’s love, Jesus took on himself and paid our debt. Your forgiveness was earned by Jesus. God loves you. God has not stopped loving you. He sent Jesus to live for you and die for your sins. God raised Jesus from the grave with power and authority to show your sins truly are forgiven. God calls you *“my people.”* God calls you, *“my nation.”* This fulfillment means you are God’s own child. Through baptism all the things God has earned for you in Christ are given to you. Through faith, a gift from God, you hold these sure treasures in your heart. God’s declaration that you belong to him silences all the attacks of the bullies of our sinful nature, the world and the devil himself. We belong to God and if we must suffer or have trials, we know our God is in control and can work them for our good. *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”* (Romans 8:28). **Yes, Christian, Live. Live like you’ll live forever. Live and Serve with your eyes on the skies. It won’t be long. God’s Grace will last forever.**

“Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.” Did you hear that God’s salvation for you will last forever? You have an eternity in heaven waiting for you. It is God’s great gift to you. Enjoy that peace. Live in that grace. **Live and Serve with your eyes on the skies.** God tells us to look to the skies. As sturdy, strong and powerful as the heavens are or as solid as the earth is beneath our feet, on the last day they’ll be rolled back, they’ll vanish like smoke. Those who reject Christ and God’s Word will be lost forever in hell. But we have a new heaven and new earth coming. Why? Because Jesus keeps his promises.

Christians are not so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly good. Jesus is coming back soon. We use and enjoy the blessings God gives in this life as good stewards. We keep our possessions in our hands to be used to glorify God, not in our hearts to be god or the measure of our existence. Live as travellers knowing that you must go further – home to heaven. While here, this is your time to work, to live, to serve God with your gifts and talents, to do it all for the glory of God whether we are at work, at school, at home, at play. Manage your time to prioritize him and his Word in your lives, to keep an eye on the sky knowing his return is near and the things of this life are only for a time. We have something better. Be generous to God and his work, and to others in our lives because everything we have is a gift from him and we know the things of this world are only for this life. We have something better coming. Expend yourselves to serve and love and help your neighbor whether that’s a family member who needs some time or service, a friend who needs a listening and encouraging ear, a child who needs our embrace, a neighbor who needs a word of encouragement or a helping hand. Do it patiently, lovingly, even though difficult. We have something better coming, and our time in this life is to live for God and serve. You can serve with joy because you know who you are, His. You know your worth to him, worth dying for. You know your purpose, to live for Him. **Yes, Live like you’ll live forever. Live and serve with your eyes on the skies. It is only for a time. God’s Grace will last forever.** *“But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.”* Amen.