

Our scripture text this morning is taken from the Hebrew Bible, the prophet Isaiah, chapter 35.

In this chapter, God promises a new and holy path for Israel that would lead them out of their bondage in Babylon to a new future.

[Read Isaiah 25]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

[Prayer]

For those of you who don't know it, I grew up in a Southern Baptist Church and served on the staff of six different Southern Baptist Churches. So, I can ask this: How many Southern Baptists do you think it takes to screw in a lightbulb?

Well, thirty, of course. One to screw in the lightbulb, and twenty-nine to protest it for being brighter than they are.

Poor little Chippie. Never saw it coming. One second, he was peacefully perched in his cage. Minding his own business. The next, the parakeet was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

According to the newspaper article, all of the problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner.

He removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. But just when he did, the phone rang. He turned to pick it up. He'd barely said "Hello" when "ssopp!" Chippie got

sucked in.

The bird owner, shocked, threw down the phone. Turned off the vacuum. And opened the bag. There was poor little Chippie, still alive, but obviously stunned. Because the bird was covered with dust, his owner grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held poor little Chippie under the running water.

Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, he did what any compassionate bird owner would do: he reached for the hair dryer. And blasted poor little Chippie with hot air. Poor little Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was doing.

“Well” he replied, “Chippie doesn't sing much anymore. He just sits and stares.

It's hard not to see why, isn't it? Sucked in, washed up, and blown over. That's enough to steal anyone's song. (*In the Eye of the Storm*, Max Lucado).

Ted's wife stared out the glass window of his hospital room last week. The surgeon had told her that, if surgery was going ok, she'd call after about an hour.

The surgery began three hours ago. No word yet from the doctor.

Their son leans over and whispers to his Mom: “Everything's going to be all right.”

Merritt and Susan have three small children, two big car payments, and one huge mortgage. Merritt's supervisor called him into his office on Friday afternoon and, told him what he had been fearing for months. Business is just too slow. As much as they hate to lose someone such as him, they're going to have to let him go.

Over the telephone on Saturday night, his Dad says, "I'm certain you'll find something else, Son. Everything's going to be all right.

Hope in the face of adversity.

We're sometimes called on to live in times for which we feel we're unprepared. Amid it all, though, I stand before you this morning, and I can say with the utmost confidence and blessed assurance:

Everything's going to be all right. Even though everything may sometimes seem all wrong. Even though the chips may be down for you. And, if you ask me how I know, I'll tell you that it's because I've been reading the 35th chapter of Isaiah.

These words, first given to the Israelites as a word of hope, echo down through the ages to us this morning. And, the same holy path God promised to them then and there, God promises to us here and now.

Isaiah says that someday blind eyes will see colors; crippled legs will be able to run races, mute

tongues will be able to sing solos, and deaf ears will hear them. And Isaiah can make you taste it! Smell it! Feel it! And hope it!

Isaiah would indeed, have us believe that some how, some way, everything is going to be alright.

God commands shaky, trembling, wobbly knees to be still. God invites anxious, dread full heavy hearts to take courage.

Yes, we can forge forward into the future with confidence. Isaiah would have us believe that, some how, some way, some day that sorrow and sighing will flee away and joy and gladness are coming to stay.

Ultimately, Isaiah says, because of our hope, even hope in the face of adversity, everything is going to be alright.

Isaiah stares into the face of pain, fear, disappointment, and disease and holds up hope, even against all of the mounting evidence for despair.

But, that's what hope is, you know. Hope is the power of being upbeat in circumstances that we know to be desperate. Hope is the vindication for everyone who's ever been counted out, but refused to be knocked out, for everyone who's stumbled, but stood right back up.

Isaiah would have us believe that despite all the evidence to the contrary, God will have the

final word. And, everything will be alright. You and I, oh how we want to believe. But, the evidence for despair seems so great. Life, after all, has filled some of our conversations in recent days with words more of despair than of hope.

It's hard to hear Isaiah's words of hope when the doctor says "I have bad news." It's hard to hear Isaiah's words of hope when we're faced with loneliness and loss and failure, or when we're faced with hurt feelings and death and sickness and broken dreams and grief and uncertainty.

Yes, it's sometimes hard to hear about hope. But Isaiah continues to proclaim "God is God, and everything is going to be alright!"

Isaiah says there'll be a highway to travel where no one will ever be sick or lost, or lonely, or afraid, or embarrassed, or ashamed, or hurt.

Yes, sorrow, sighing, and sickness will go away. Joy and gladness will come and stay. God will take what's broken and make it whole again. God will have the final word.

If it's true that God is for us, not against us, with us, not forsaking us, receiving us, not avoiding us, helping us, not abandoning us, if all of that is true, then it is enough!

If that's true, it will do. If that's true, then weak hands can be strengthened, wobbly knees can be still, and anxious hearts can take courage.

If that's true, it will do. But, is all of that too good to be true? No, no, no. Not in God's

world. In God's world, all of those promises are too good not to be true.

There's hope in the face of adversity. And, that Hope oft times calls us to action.

Ted, whose friend was one of the managers for the circus, was taking a backstage tour. But, when he came upon the elephants, he suddenly stopped. He was confused by the fact that each of the elephants, being the huge creatures that they are, were being held by just a small rope tied to their front leg. No chains and no cages. It was obvious that the elephants could, at any time, break away from the ropes they were tied to.

Ted saw a trainer nearby and asked him why those beautiful, magnificent animals just stood there and made no attempt to get away.

"Well," the trainer said, "when they are very young and much smaller, we use the same small rope to tie them. And, at that age, it's enough to hold them.

As they grow up, though, they are conditioned to believe they can't break away. So now, as huge and as powerful as they are, they believe the small rope can still hold them. So they never try to break free."

There's a certain sadness in a sight such as that. These beautiful majestic animals could, whenever they decided, break free from their bonds. But, because they believe they can't, they don't. And, so they're stuck right where they are. Held by nothing more than a small rope.

Please allow me to say this to you as pastorally and as lovingly as I know how. Those beautiful elephants, tied to a small rope, aren't much different than some of us.

Some of us go through life believing we're unable to do something because of some past failure in our life. And, all that holds you from even trying to do something is that small rope of a past failure.

Or, perhaps the small rope holding you back is someone else who told you that you couldn't do something. So, you never tried.

Or, perhaps the small rope holding you back is the one that you put there. You don't think you can do it.

That reminds me of something I heard Friday night in the musical *Hadestown* at the Peace Center. In that show, one of the characters, Hermes, says to the lovelorn Orpheus concerning whether he'll have a future with the woman of his dreams, Eurydice:

The “[m]eanest dog you’ll ever meet–It ain’t the hound dog in the street. He bares his teeth and tears your skin.

But brother, that’s the worst of him. The dog you really got to dread is the one that howls inside your head. It’s him whose howling drives men mad. And a mind to its undoing.”

Then, a little later, Hermes says to Orpheus: “I’ll tell you where the real road lies: between

your ears, behind your eyes. That is the path to Paradise. And, likewise, the road to ruin.”

Hope oftentimes calls us to action. And, sometimes that means we must change the way we look at ourselves, or how we view the world.

During turbulent and uncertain days we'll often go through uncharted territory. There'll be no familiar landmarks. We must truly walk by faith. And God is watching. For all you know right at this moment, just as God did on Resurrection Sunday, God may be telling the angel to move the stone.

The check may be in the mail. The apology may be in the making. The relationship may be mending. The job offer may be on the way. The body may be healing. Don't quit, for if you do, you very well may miss the answer to your prayers.

There's hope in the face of adversity. That hope often calls us to action. And, God give us hope for all of our tomorrows.

As I mentioned earlier, Isaiah 35 tells us that that sorrow and sighing will flee away and joy and gladness are coming to stay.

The sound of Martha's voice on the other end of the telephone always brought a smile to her pastor's face. She was not only one of the oldest members of the congregation, but one of the most faithful.



“Preacher, could you stop by this afternoon? I need to talk with you.”

“Of course, I’ll be there around three,” her pastor said.

It didn’t take long to discover the reason for the call. As they sat facing each other in the quiet of her small living room, Martha shared the news that her doctor had just discovered an inoperable tumor.

“She says I probably have about six months to live,” she said.

“I’m so sorry to . . .”

But before her pastor could finish, Martha interrupted, “Don’t be sorry, Preacher. The Lord’s been good to me. I’ve lived a long life. I’m ready to go. You know that.”

“But I do want to talk with you about my funeral. I’ve been thinking about it, and there are things that I know I want.”

The two talked quietly for a long time. When it seemed that they had covered just about everything, Martha paused, looked up with a twinkle in her eye, and then added, “One more thing, preacher. When they bury me, I want my old Bible in one hand and a fork in the other.”

“A fork? Why do you want to be buried with a fork?” her pastor asked.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about all of the church dinners and banquets that I attended through

the years,” she explained. “And one thing sticks in my mind. At those really nice get-togethers, when the meal was almost finished, a server would come by to collect the dirty dishes.

I can hear the words now. Someone would lean over my shoulder and whisper, ‘You can keep your fork.’ And do you know what that meant? It meant dessert was coming! And, it didn’t mean a cup of Jell-O or pudding or even a dish of ice cream. You don’t need a fork for that. It meant the good stuff, like chocolate cake or cherry pie! When they told me I could keep my fork, I knew that the best was yet to come!”

That’s exactly what I want people to talk about at my funeral. Oh, they can talk about all the good times we had together. That would be nice. But when they walk by my casket and look at my pretty blue dress, I want them to turn to one another and ask, ‘Why the fork?’

And when they ask, I want you to tell them that I kept my fork because I had hope! I had hope that the best is yet to come!” (*Chicken Soup for the Soul*—Third Edition).

This is the Gospel. This is the Good News. And, it’s true. Thanks be to God. A-men.