### “The Lame Shall Leap” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 11, 2022

**Isaiah 35:1–9**

1The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus 2it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. . . He will come and save you.’

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water . . .

8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

**Matthew 11:2–11**

2When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” 4Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.”

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10This is the one about whom it is written,
‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’
11Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Welcome to the First Church. It is with joy that I welcome all of you here today, and it is with hope that you be filled with the spirit of hope and joy this Christmas season. The messages of hope and joy are found in our Isaiah passage.

So get ready for another sermon about Hebrew prophecy and fulfillment. Isaiah 35 is a fascinating vision. I like the picture of a Holy Way on which only the pure can tread. No one can go astray, and no one will be harmed. American songwriter Bob Dylan took this image and gave it a very different meaning. He sang “I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it,” meaning that people keep refusing to go the right way. But the Bible is more optimistic; the pure will travel on it. The pathway was made with the anticipation that it will be used.

Isaiah 35 also has elements that sound very much like the miracles Jesus performed in his ministry, doesn’t it? And Jesus borrowed a phrase from Isaiah 35 before he ever began his ministry. As found in Luke 4, Jesus announced his ministry in Nazareth by reading from Isaiah 61 to the synagogue audience, and then saying “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). But in the middle of the Isaiah 61 passage there’s additional insight when he inserts a phrase from 35:5, “recovery of sight to the blind” (Luke 4:18). The healing ideas of Isaiah 35 were too important to leave out of his initial announcement. So we can, indeed, consider Isaiah 35 as one of the messianic promises that was fulfilled by Jesus.

The healing—physical and spiritual—that was characteristic of Jesus’ ministry is also referred to by Jesus in his answer to John’s enquiry as to whether he was the one they were waiting for. It’s as though Jesus says, “See for yourself. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the poor hear the good news preached to them. What do you think? What more would the Messiah do?”

It’s his roundabout way of saying yes. He likes to give answers that force one to think. John would be as capable as anyone else of recalling Isaiah 35, where the blind are healed, and the tongue of the speechless sing. Remember, most Jews were very well-versed in the Bible from their childhood. Jesus wants John to link up his scriptural memory with the reports he is hearing about Jesus’ ministry. If you combine memory, reason, and data, you’ll get the right answer. What would *you*, as a thoughtful resident of Israel, think about the messages of healing and good news? Would you also be putting two and two together?

Jesus also interrogates the person who asked him the question, and the whole audience present at the time. Who did you come out to see when you came to see John? A softie? A rich guy? No. But a man more courageous and decent than other men. In fact greater than anyone. But even *he* is not greater than those who will receive the Spirit. It’s not that everyone hearing Jesus’ message will be greater than John, but rather that they will receive a gift that John will never receive, for we know, unfortunately, John will not survive till the day of Pentecost.

The least of those who receive the Spirit receive something greater than John ever received. Jesus’ first comparison is between John and all other people, and John comes out superior. His second comparison is between John and anyone who will be around to receive the Spirit, and the latter are superior, not morally, but only in the sense of *receiving* something superior.

This is the only plausible interpretation. Any other way of reading it leads to impossibilities and absurdities. Again, Jesus wants to compel his listeners to think. Reason it out: how and in what way am I superior to John? Only in that I have been given a gift that he, at least in his earth life, was not given. All of us living since then have received this gift of the Spirit. The Spirit is there when you receive Truth, helping you to recognize it. It responds when you are in the presence of love, hope, or joy. It will help you reflect God’s generosity to others. It is your gift from God and Jesus.

To summarize, I see both of these Scriptures as requiring the experience or understanding of Pentecost to bring out the full meaning. The dry and lifeless desert becomes a place with water springs, where life is renewed and spiritual sources are released. This is what happened on Pentecost: Peter became like one born again, with a new fiery power to preach. We are told that healings accompanied the ministry of the apostles. They were *aware* of living in the sunshine of a new revelation. They were filled with the Spirit and acted upon its energy.

Here, in Advent, we await not Pentecost, but the coming of Christ, the Feast of the Incarnation. But what is one of the greatest gifts Christ brought, if not the Spirit poured out on Pentecost? Jesus awakens us to the deeper knowledge of God the Father and of the truth that we are all part of God’s family. And the Spirit is with us to help us daily awaken to receive the spiritual fire, and pour it out in a recycling of God’s message of joy.

And so let us live in gratitude and anticipation, in joy and surety. We are those more blessed than the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, for we live after the Messiah and the Spirit have come. Let us live out our legacy, our spiritual inheritance to bring hope, peace, and joy to our family, and *God’s* family, to truly bring heaven here to earth.