

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
The sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 8, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft
You are experiencing the power of God

⁴Tell those who have a fearful heart: Be strong. Do not be afraid. Look! Your God will come with vengeance. With God's own retribution, he will come and save you. ⁵Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unplugged. ⁶The crippled will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy. Waters will flow in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland. ⁷The burning sand will become a pool, and in the thirsty ground there will be springs of water.
— Isaiah 35:4-7a EHV

What type of music do you listen to when you are on a run or at the gym? Likely, something upbeat that keeps you going, right? As you may have noticed by the fact that Pastor Pufahl chants and sings in worship more than I do, I am not the most musical person in the world. So, I typically do not listen to music when I am at the gym. I like to listen to podcasts and audio books.

Recently, my lifting literature has been connected to apologetics. Apologetics is the study of the defense of the Christian faith. This goes from giving scientific evidences for the Creation account from the Bible to more general arguments for the existence of God. Some of these arguments can be well thought out, some of them are less than stellar. Historically, there has been some hesitancy toward apologetics within confessional Lutheranism, that is us, because your faith is not the result of a rational decision. In confessional Lutheranism, we understand that the Holy Spirit has called you by the gospel and enlightened you with his gifts. It is he who calls, gathers, enlightens the whole Christian church on earth. Now, don't get me wrong there is benefit to the field of apologetics. It can be helpful to remove stumbling blocks from hearing God's Word that people may have built themselves or received from society. Yet, we need to recognize that faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit, not a decision to make based off the best presented evidence or most convincing argument.

In the realm of apologetics, one of the most suspect arguments is called the experiential argument for the existence of God. Essentially, the concept presented here is that an argument to share with people about the existence of God is your personal experiences with him in your life. In some churches, this takes the form of giving your personal testimony, the story of your conversion. For others, this just takes the form of sharing with others how being connected to the God of the universe makes you feel.

As you may understand, this can be an incredibly subjective argument to make. Did you really feel that way? If no one else noticed the change, can we really believe it happened? Are you sure this wasn't just indigestion?

Confessional Lutherans are often skeptical about the experiential argument for the existence of God because we know that God works through the means of grace, not through feelings. Yet, let us be careful about our pushback in some way. Although we know that God does not choose to work through feelings and personal experiences are not as reliable a source of confidence as the Word of God, we do have to acknowledge the fact that you are experiencing the power of God. Do not fall into the sinful disposition that doubts God's power in your life. You are followers of a powerful God. He exercises his power in your life. He does this to save you from this sinful broken world.

The reading that we look to today is a prophecy from Isaiah about the power of God as it was experienced by his people. This prophecy speaks about the wonderful work of God in their lives. You too are and shall experience this power in your life. Brothers and sisters, you are experiencing the power of God.

In this section of Scripture, Isaiah foretold what will happen for God's people. Isaiah wrote this book over the 60 years of his ministry. God had given him a message of law and gospel for people to see prior to the exile in Babylon, after the exile, and still today. Last week, Pastor Pufahl mentioned the Babylonian exile in his sermon. Essentially, this was discipline for God's people breaking their covenant with him. In the

midst of this however, God still held out the promise of his loving power being experienced by his people.

Among strong condemnations of sin and judgment, Isaiah brought wonderful messages of peace and salvation. Today's reading is one of those statements. In sharing a condemnation for the nations, the recipients of Isaiah's message heard that although the nations will be judged, they should not fear. They would be saved. God was coming with vengeance for the nations, but for God's people, he was coming with power to save.

As we approach this section of Isaiah, the concept of prophetic perspective should be reviewed. Prophetic perspective is similar to looking at a mountain range. Imagine you are looking at the Four Peaks in the distance. All you see is peaks of mountains. Can you really tell which one is closer than the other? Your perspective is like that of the prophet. The prophet shares God's message. If you change the angle that you look at the peaks from, you will notice that Brown's Peak is closer to the valley than Brother Peak, Sister Peak, and Amethyst Peak. Similar to this, from a different perspective, the prophecies of the Old Testament have earlier partial fulfillment and a greater ultimate fulfillment.

Isaiah's prophecy of God's people experiencing his powerful salvation amidst the judgment of the nations is fulfilled in the return from exile partially, the first coming of Jesus, and ultimately with the second coming of Jesus on Judgment Day. When Isaiah said that the eyes of the blind will see, the ears of the deaf will be unplugged, the crippled will leap like deer, and the mute will sing for joy, he shared a powerful message that is experienced in its being foretold, its partial experience, and its ultimate experience.

Isaiah's message would have been comforting to those who heard it foretold. This was the gospel hope amidst coming pain. Although they knew that they would be disciplined for breaking the covenant with God, Isaiah's message could bring them through it. They broke God's two-sided covenant – do this and you will maintain the land. Yet, God would not break his unilateral covenant. God would be faithful to his eternal promise. God would still deliver his people. This powerful word could be experienced during the midst of the exile, after the exile, and still today as people await the final judgment.

Isaiah's message had the fulfillment in a greater way as it looked forward to the first coming of the Messiah. In Jesus' earthly ministry, we see these truths lived out physically and spiritually. Physically speaking, Jesus gave sight to the blind. Jesus gave the ability to hear to the deaf. Jesus gave the ability to walk to the crippled. Jesus gave the ability to sing for joy to the mute. During his earthly ministry, Jesus did all of these things. Today's gospel was just one example of this.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, this was experienced by people spiritually as well. The deaf and mute man may have been able to hear and speak again physically, but the people that witnessed Jesus' healing miracle had their mouths opened spiritually. They couldn't help but tell people that Jesus had done everything well. They couldn't help but proclaim that Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. They were able to do this because God the Holy Spirit gave them the ability to spiritually perceive the truth that Jesus is Lord.

You too experience this power of God in your life. You have been brought to see that Jesus is Lord. You have been brought to hear the good news of the gospel – Jesus lived, died, and rose for you. Now, your mouth has been opened to confess your faith. You are the blind that can now see. You are the mute who now speak. You have experienced this power of God in your life.

Isaiah's prophecy will be fulfilled in the greatest sense as we look forward to Jesus' second coming. Jesus will come on the last day in judgment. God's enemies will be condemned and sent to destruction. Jesus will come with vengeance. BUT... on that day you will be saved. Judgment Day will not be a fearful day for God's people. Those who are clothed in Jesus' perfection with their sins washed away will stand in the judgment. In speaking about this day, Jesus says, "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these things begin to happen, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is near." (Luke 21:27-28 EHV)

When it comes to the end times, we have a "now but not yet" perspective. Christ Jesus is on his throne right now. We don't need to wait for Christ's reign to begin. We also therefore experience the joys and bliss of Jesus' powerful reign. Yet, we have not experienced it to the fullest extent. That day is yet to come. When our bodies are glorified and we enter body and soul into the new heavens and the new earth

to the glorious new home that God has prepared for us, we will have experienced God's power to the fullest extent. You are experiencing God's power and there is still more to come.

In the heavenly kingdom, all these prophesied words will be fulfilled. There will be no fear. There will be no more blindness. There will be no more deafness. No one will be crippled any longer. No one will be mute. All the problems of this life will be gone. All your physical ailments will be gone. We will live in a new earth that is not ravaged by sin. There will be water flowing in the wilderness. The wastelands will be no more.

At the end of Isaiah, God shared an image of this new heavenly kingdom that will be experienced by us. He says,

¹⁷Watch this! I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.

The former things will not be remembered.

They will not come to mind.

¹⁸Instead, rejoice and celebrate forever, because of what I am creating.

Watch this! I am about to create Jerusalem to be a source of gladness, and her people will be a source of joy.

¹⁹I also will be glad because of Jerusalem,

and I will rejoice over my people.

The sound of weeping will not be heard in her again,

nor will the sound of crying.

²⁰There will never again be an infant there who lives for only a few days,

or an elderly man who does not fill out all his days, (Isaiah 65:17-20a EHV)

This is the power that God is working in your life. In Christ Jesus, your sins were taken away. You have been brought to life. You will live forever in heaven. One day soon, you will experience the bliss of heaven that is here described by Isaiah. For now, while you eagerly await this, you experience the joy of God's power in your life.

While we live out our days awaiting the day that we will fully see this, let us live as people who have had our mouths unstuffed. We are the formerly mute who can now sing for joy. Let us sing for joy and proclaim to others that Jesus has done everything well. Let us share with us that we have experienced God's power in our lives.

The experiential argument for the existence of God may not be the strongest apologetic argument, but I know that God's power worked in your life has changed everything. You have been brought to see, hear, and sing for joy. Let us now be moved by this experienced power to tell others about what the Lord has done and has in store for us in heaven. Amen.