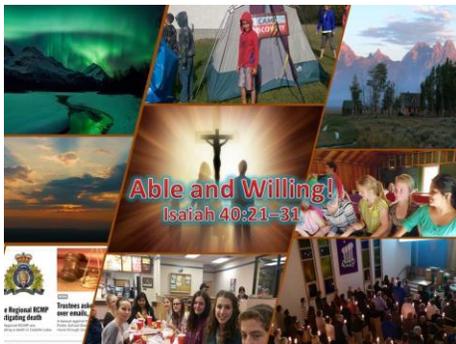


Sermon, February 4, 2018 - Epiphany 5,

Able and Willing

Isaiah 40:21–31



Dear Friends in Christ

How you ever wondered if God does really help you? I mean, there are times in which you pray and ask for God's help and things happened perhaps in an unexplained way. But once whatever happened is long gone, we reflect back and think that maybe what happened was either by your own capacity or just a coincidence. After all God, well, either doesn't get concerned with menial things in our lives, or maybe he is not there at all.

But as we hear from the Old Testament reading for today, not only God is real, is there, but also willing and able to do anything. Is there anything God isn't powerful enough to do? Well, of course, we know God is omnipotent, almighty, so we know the answer is no.

Ok, but how about those things we consider as a "longshot" things? When I really need something, something that really matters, maybe something that does seem like a long shot, is God really able to help me? And, maybe even more, is he willing to help?

Our Old Testament text this morning gives us an emphatic yes to both! God, as God, is both able and willing to do the impossible beginning with the rescuing His beloved people.

I. Even before it happens, God answers Israel's wavering faith in his ability or willingness to keep his promises, to bring them back from Babylon.

All through history, we see this truth active in the life of God's people. Our Old Testament reading portrays the nation of Israel who was wavering in their faith in God, specifically in his ability or willingness to keep his promises, to bring them back from Babylon.

At this point in time, a prophet by the name Isaiah tells the people of Israel that they will be taken captive by another invading empire, the Babylonians. Isaiah comes into the scene with his message about 100 years before it happened. Long-time still to go, yet God send his prophet to prepare them. Before it even happened, God already answered their prayers.

It was the Israelites fault that they would be taken captives. Their unfaithfulness and the acceptance of different religions into their lives were the things that brought upon themselves that horrible judgment, the Babylonian captivity. Talking about complaints and expressing an unfair condition, right? The people of Israel complained that that wasn't fair. Although not with those words, rather they thought of themselves abandoned by God. God says through Isaiah: "Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"?"

You can hear disbelief in those words. You can hear doubt and desperation. They doubted the Lord altogether. But where there is bad news, there is always good

news if we trust in God fully, because in our text we see that even before it happens, even before the Israelites knew what is like to be captives, God already answered Israel's cry.

But before they were redeemed they Israelites will still struggle some more. And they will come to a point where it would seem on the surface that is, that the Lord was actually defeated by the gods of Babylon, that he was not powerful enough to save his people.

If not that, then, they will even think that God simply abandoned them, that he isn't willing to save them.

But God in his omniscience, that is in his all-knowing, knew what the people would think and assume, so he provides already an answer to their weakness and doubts, reminding them that he is both infinitely able and lovingly willing to rescue them, bring them back to their homeland, and guard and keep them as his beloved, chosen people.

Now, the question was, would those people remember what God promised them? Would they believe what God was affirming them? Because, as you know we are quick to forget things, especially when we are facing hardship and struggles. The people of Israel were no different, so God actually reminds them and even gently chastises with this words: (vv 21–26): “Don't you remember what I've been saying to you from the beginning? I am the Lord, the incomparable Creator of heaven and earth. The true King of all the kings of the earth. Of course I am able!”

Then he encourages them (vv 27–31): “Wait for me; trust in me! I will give you my strength. For, despite how it looks now, I have spoken: I will never abandon you. I already know, have set in motion, how I will carry out my promise to bring you back to Jerusalem.”

And even more, for the Lord also promises his ultimate plan of salvation that was not only for the Israelites but for all human kind, that is his Servant—who will rescue and protect them forever, giving back “double” blessing for all their suffering, even though it was because of their sins.

II. Our dear Father answers us in our weak and tempted faith. He is able and willing to rescue and preserve us, his beloved Israel, his Church.

That is the scenario we have in the Old Testament reading for today. And as usual, that was in the past, it was several thousand years ago, and for a different people. What about us here today? What about you and I as we face the uncertainties of the 21st century? Well, we, you and I, like Israel, we too face temptations to doubt whether God is able or willing to rescue and strengthen us. In fact many are even deserting the Church, their faith, well, because God is now what they were expecting, or is not making any sense for our present times.

I have said this many times before, and I'll say it again, today, it looks as if the Church is failing, our congregations shrinking, our culture hostile to our message, to God's word. Our attendance has dropped, yes many are part of the triumphant church now, but many are lost to the world as well, the thought that we are following an antiquated man-made religion is catching up with many. You probably know several people who think like that, don't you?

But in a way we have failed, yes, because we have lived a religious faith, rather than a Christian faith. What's the difference? A religious faith only follows what the religious norms give you, like the Jews of Jesus time, for example. It's what I call the cultural religion. Its' what we are used to, it's what we are born with and in. The

problem is that seldom we allow Christ to work in our lives. But the Christian faith trust Christ solely even above the religion. A good religion should lead us to Christ, however many times we emphasise only the rituals and forget the Sacramental parts of it. For example, we think church is here in these 4 walls that God is here in this consecrated place only. And forget that actually God doesn't live in 4 walls, no, God lives in our hearts, in our relationships, in all spectrums of our lives. This places is consecrated as a house of prayer, as a house of preaching and as a house of equipping, so that when you go out you don't forget who you are. That's what the Christian faith is all about. That we trust Jesus, that we live in his ways, that we seek that strong fellowship with Him through his word.

But there is more. The exterior world is putting a pressure on us heavily. You have seen it, haven't you? Look at our government policies that affect directly our church life. It looks and feels like we are in a Babylonian captivity, don't we. Now, we have two choices, one is fight it with our own strength and wisdom, or give in or up to the culture around us. The end result is the same: Desperation! Frustration!

Again, as I have said it before, seen our congregation, or congregations for that matter, gives me a deep sense of defeat, of failure. I'm sure it has happened to you as well. When we look at things in the world around us, we now feel like we are a minority. It seems like there is only bad news all over. But the Old Testament also applies to us today. God knew our need and prepared his answer, an answer that comes even from the foundations of the earth: the Christ. And that is our second choice, that we would trust God's promises, because his promises, as given in our text of mediation are also for us today.

And like he did with the people of Israel, he gently chastises us for our lack of faith and reminds us: "Do you not know? . . . Has it not been told you from the beginning?" He is the almighty Creator, whose Word is unbreakable. He is the true king, even of our own nation, whether he is acknowledged or not. He is able! And he rules over all, specifically for the sake of his Church, you and I, today. Doesn't matter what the world thinks or is doing, what matters is that we remember and trust God's promises.

Remember that he comforts and strengthens us today, even in his own body and blood in the Sacrament. For he is the suffering Servant, Jesus, who paid for our iniquity, who exchanged our weakness for his strength and our sin for his righteousness. For our sake, the Father did not rescue him, but rather let him endure the cross.

He is, therefore, able and willing to rescue us from every threat and need we face. Yes, He is able to sustain us and keep us calms and trustful that He has the future of our congregation in his hands. Yes! He is able and willing to give us peace, when the world around is pressuring us, yes he is able to sustain us even when we feel like we are in a Babylonian captivity, even rescuing us. Yes he is able and willing to change our hearts so we trust in him more. So we can see his mighty hand working in our lives. Yes he is able and willing. But the question remains, are we willing to faithfully hear his word, seeking his will? Are we willing to allow him live in our hearts not only in this place? Are we willing to be his church out there in the world?

Even there, when we are willing, the spirit, Jesus says, is willing but the flesh is weak. Even there, remember that if God is the creator of the universe, and sustains it. He is able to bring the world out of nothing, then he is able to keep us willing, not only in spirit by even in the flesh, all for the sake of Christ.

Conclusion:

The promise is ours: “They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength . . . they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint,” here, hidden in the midst of weakness and exile, but finally there in our homeland with him forever. Amen.