

**Sunday, September 9, 2018 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**“It’s a Great Time to be the Church!”**

Isaiah 35: 4-7a

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Story Applied

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

There’s a lot of negative stuff about churches in the news. Globally the church is seeing incredible numerical growth but in the United States it is facing many challenges. Many Christian schools, as well as churches are declining or shutting their doors. Clergy, once one of the most respected professions around have suffered in reputation from various scandals. Many Christians feel their voices are not heard. Inter-denominational debates over social issues are further fracturing church unity. And then there are the demographic observations done by the well-respected Barna Institute about the attitudes of current young people toward the church, a generation which like never before is disengaging from the institutional church. In a book called, “You Lost Me,” some reasons for this exodus from the church by many once active Christian young people include seeing the church as overprotective, of being too quick to give simple, easy answers to complex questions, of churches being anti-science, being repressive and overly judgmental, of being exclusive and of frowning upon anyone expressing doubts or wrestling with difficult questions. The snowball effect of all of this leads many people to believe that the Church is fighting a losing battle, not only because of attack by outside influences but because it is out of touch in communicating its message. Is this a good time to be the Church?

I suppose people in our Old Testament text could have been asking the same kind of question – “Is this a good time to be Israel and Judah?” On the ledger, Israel and Judah were doing well. Wealthy, self-sufficient nations with abundant resources, envied by their enemies. Yet not all is well with God’s people Israel and Judah – they are spiritually impoverished, ever-greater numbers worshipping false gods that required child sacrifice. People trusted their wealth and affluence, laughing down prophets like Isaiah warning that everything is about to come crashing down. It’s going to get worse before it gets better. Isaiah spends six chapters in great

detail describing the coming destruction of Jerusalem before finally a joyful, shining light comes in the form of our text today, an encouragement for the faithful that a time is coming when things will be even better the gold old days – the blind will see, the deaf hear, the disabled leaping and those unable to speak shouting for joy. Water, a symbol of life will replace the death of the desert and wilderness. How far off that must have seemed for the faithful, who haven't even seen the downfall of their evil age yet, much less His restoration to something even greater.

Trusting God to make things right when something important is going wrong is not always easy. When your reality is physical pain, emotional trauma and the like, who wants to be told, "Oh, don't worry, be happy, everything is great!" Yet just like God making promises for restoration even while things looked bleak for the faithful in our text today, God's promises are still there, even when life is hard.

We live by faith, not by sight. Another way of saying this is we live by trust in God's promises, despite our hardships. Over the years I've met with sick people thousands of times. People with Parkinson's, recovering from surgery, cancer survivors, people in hospice care and so on. They've each experienced physical pain and discomfort worse and more prolonged than anything I've endured. They've each been restricted in doing certain things they love, they've each had relationships suffer because their illnesses isolated them, took them away from a world that kept moving on. What's amazing is how often these people are so full of hope. Sure, God has done great things to see them through the worst of their respective illnesses but it's more than that, because the kind of trust they're talking about is more than what God has done. It's trust in a promise yet to come, something still unfulfilled yet which they know from the very bottom of the heart is true.

Why? Because the same God who promised to restore the people of God in our text sent His Son to fulfill them in Jesus Christ. It's probably our Old Testament text that has people so excited as we hear about Jesus healing a deaf and mute man in our Gospel text today. There's a buzz about Jesus who does exactly what God says He will do.

I ask again, is this a great time to be the Church, the people of God? There are so many things you can point to as ailments and sicknesses yet God's promises point us not only to hope for the future but cheerful courage to take on new challenges.

Rather than buy the false story that things are so bad, let's talk about opportunity. What a time we live in today! We're in one of the most interesting places in the world. Our region in the southwest United States is where the Global North and the Global South meet – cultures and peoples combine and connect, and the west coast is the edge where West and East meet. Ours is a rich world where people from all places and cultures come together, and we as a church and school get to do life together in this context, becoming part of God's family all one with each other in our growing, dynamic city. As we grow into being more and more a part of our community, in learning more of what it is to walk as Jesus' disciples, what a time and place in which to live!

Sure, if you want you can list a hundred reasons to be down about the Church but there are a thousand more why this is an exciting time. We're all missionaries, embedded among more and more people who don't know Christ. You don't have to pick up and leave home behind anymore to reach out to a hurt and dying world. You could call that losing the battle... I prefer to think of it as an opportunity! We have a chance every day to think through how we communicate a changeless Word of God to a changing culture and communicate it in new ways. A chance to learn how to listen to younger generations and where criticism is valid, to own it and become better witnesses of Jesus. Challenges await us but that's no reason to lose confidence, for our confidence is not in ourselves, it is in Jesus Christ who will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf, cause the lame to leap like deer and the mute to shout for joy, who will fill up parched and dying lands with the life-giving water of His Word and care for the growing physical needs of people who lack necessities. That Jesus from our Gospel text, who already fills in part today our text from Isaiah isn't gone. He continues to send us out boldly,

confidently with joy in our hearts. You and I were intended for exactly this time and place – yes, this is a good time to be a Christian, it is a great time to be the Church! In Jesus' name, Amen.