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

Amen. The word of God that we consider today is from the prophet Isaiah, *“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”*

Weak hands. Feeble knees. And fear. These were things that characterized the people of Israel during the ministry of Isaiah the prophet. They were a people worn out from long wandering on the weary road. They were bereft of rest and had no hope. The Lord had exercised patience and kindness in spite of a string of wicked kings who led the people away from him into trusting in false gods. Justice was perverted. God’s law was ignored and forgotten. Finally, God’s patience was spent and the hammer fell. He allowed the Assyrians and Babylonians to conquer Israel and Judah. Many of the people were uprooted and taken away into captivity. Once busy cities were left to rot in desolation. Thus Isaiah paints Israel as a desert – wilderness, dry land, burning sand, thirsty ground, where the only inhabitants are wild jackals.

Thus it was for Israel and thus it is for us. Weak hands. Feeble knees. And fear. Does that description hit close to home? How many of us have had issues with feeble knees? I’ve known several of you who have had knees, shoulders, and hips replaced; physical therapy regimens. I mean when it comes to the body, we’ve all got something to deal with don’t we? The human body is a marvel of God’s creation but because of sin’s curse, we all know what it’s like when something in the body is not functioning as God designed it. I’ve got the type 1 diabetes and that’s been an annoying disease to manage but I know it’s nothing compared with some of the things you’ve dealt with, and that we all will deal with as we age. The body is just like everything else we see. Everything has been touched by sin. Our own hearts are twisted so that we do not desire the right things. Rather, we desire the things that destroy us and harm others. There is our own trust in false gods. Our own perversion of justice, always putting ourselves first, our own ignoring and forgetting the way of God. And so the weary road leads us through Isaiah’s burning sands and haunts of jackals. It stretches on and on and the more we walk, the frailer our knees become.

But here we are given a beautiful vision of God transforming the desert into a lush, green place: It will blossom like the crocus; dusty dryness will be replaced with water, streams, pools, springs of water, grass, reeds and rushes. These vivid descriptions of the landscape tell us just how important the created world is to God. And it isn’t just the landscape that will be changed. God’s people will be re-energized and restored. There is no reason to be afraid. Tell those shaking hands to be steady and those knocking knees to stand firm! Because your God is coming with vengeance! Vengeance? Hold on now. For a bunch of sinners, that doesn’t sound very encouraging. Ah, but the vengeance is not directed at us. Vengeance against the enemies of God’s people. In this case, the Assyrians and Babylonians. The Lord was happy to use them to carry out his judgment,

but their dominance was not meant to last. God was still in control and he still loved his people. He is coming with vengeance – he will come and save you!

Now, these words had a partial fulfillment in Israel's past. Indeed, Assyria and Babylon's reckoning did come. God raised up the Persians who allowed his people to resettle in their homeland. Thus the desolate places became inhabited again and there was some measure of joy and restoration in the desert. But it was clear to some of them, as it is clear to us that these words paint a picture far more beautiful than anything they had experienced yet. The imagery Isaiah uses here conjures up visions of the Garden of Eden – paradise itself restored. The Israelites did not quite come home to a desert transformed into a lush oasis. Instead of seeing the glory and majesty of God in a land perfectly restored, they came back to find God's temple completely demolished and Jerusalem a shadow of its former glory. After all, this was not the happy victory Israel had been hoping for. It wasn't a victory at all. It was more like a buyout. They went from belonging to hostile foreign nations to belonging to a slightly more tolerant foreign nation. And so the returned exiles came back to the Promised Land and there they continued to wait with weak hands and feeble knees for God to come and save them.

Isaiah's prophecy finds its true fulfillment later. God did come to save them! He sent his Son Jesus the Christ. But again, when they saw Jesus, he may not have been what they had in mind. He did not come and immediately make the desert the garden of paradise. John the Baptist preached that the coming Messiah would baptize with fiery judgment. But Jesus did not come in that manner. He did not restore Israel from Persia or Rome. As we read, John found himself in prison wondering whether he had his story straight. Was this Jesus really the one? Would he make the desert rejoice and blossom like the crocus? Would he make weak hands strong and feeble knees firm?

Jesus sent encouraging word back to John – look around you. You've seen God at work. He has already begun bringing water to the thirsty ground. *"The blind receive their sight and the lame walk."* One of the signs that Jesus truly was the Promised One was that he literally made feeble knees firm! *"lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."* The miracles of Jesus were not just magic tricks to prove that Jesus was the Son of God. They were acts of restoration. Jesus made people whole again spiritually by forgiving sins and also physically by repairing disordered bodies and even reversing death itself. In his ministry, Jesus was beginning to transform the landscape as Isaiah foretold. In other words, Jesus' words and deeds respond to John's question with an emphatic "Yes!" "John, rest assured, I am the one. Be strong! Fear not! Behold your God has come to save you."

How did Jesus save us? He won a victory over our enemies but again it was not the kind of victory that we would have expected. Jesus' crucified body itself became the desert. Like dry land, he was parched of thirst

as he was dying. As the cities of Judah had been left desolate to become a haunt of Jackals, so Jesus was forsaken on the cross and cried out to his Father in heaven. As the people of Israel were left with weak, trembling hands, Jesus' hands were weakened by the great nails that pierced them. And as their knees were feeble, Jesus was so feeble after being severely beaten that the centurions enlisted Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross to Calvary for him. Jesus took all our weakness and all our suffering into his body.

But on the third day, Jesus came forth from death in a glorified body; a body that will never grow weak, never become feeble, never experience pain, and never, ever taste defeated death again. Jesus' resurrected body itself became the starting point of a transformation that will ultimately spread over the entire creation, making it like Paradise: blossoming, blooming, green and flowing with pure water.

The renewal that began with the body of Jesus has touched us also. The pure water of baptism began the same transformation in each of us. And every time we partake of Jesus' crucified and glorified body and blood in the Lord's Supper, he continues to pour that restoration into us.

Now, for a time, we are still broken by sin. Our own sin and the sins of others detract from the renewal God has begun. We still have weak hands, feeble knees, and we still have fear. But we are blessed. God is at work in and through us, continuing to restore us and his world. He is strengthening our hands with the strength of Christ. He is making our knees firm to make us stand with the stature of Christ. And he is replacing fear with the joy of Christ.

Behold O Church of God, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you! Jesus is the Promised One and he is coming again. And when he appears, his transformative work will reach every corner of creation. Imagine it! *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus.* Wheelchairs, walkers, canes, (and insulin pumps) will be no more. Weak bodies will be made strong like the body of Jesus. War will give way to peace. Angry voices will fade into the swelling song of praise to God and the Lamb. Stress will be tamed into never-ending peace and rest. Fear will become love. Grief will become joy. Everything that troubles us will not just disappear but God will make it into something beautiful. Isaiah gives us the final word: *"And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."* AMEN.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.