

The Hope of Salvation

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral—November 27, 2022

“Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come for vengeance, for the recompense of God; He will come and save you.” (Isaiah 35:4)

Before and after. With the end of November and with December about to dawn, we arrive at the time of year where our focus shifts toward Christmas—toward our annual celebration of the Lord’s Advent. We can reflect once again how good and useful it is to mark this event, in that it changed the course of history, and holds the power to transform our lives. Our Savior was born, and because of that we can know Him and following Him to heaven—He can save us.

It doesn’t take much looking around in the Word of the Lord to find teachings about the profoundness of the change that took place. Before His advent, “people could see only a shadow of Divine truth,” but after His advent we are able to see truth “in a state of light” (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 99; cf. *Divine Love and Wisdom* 233:3). Now, “the Lord withholds people from falsities by great force. [But] such a force did not exist before the [His] Coming” (*Arcana Caelestia* 6945:3). Before the Lord’s coming, there was potential for “the faithful believers who belonged to the spiritual church” to be to be afflicted and oppressed, but there was “protection and deliverance by the Lord—when He was in the world” (*Arcana Caelestia* 9197). The same protection is granted to us today (see *True Christian Religion* 123:6). Before He came into the world, the Lord was present with people indirectly through heaven, but now He is present directly with people by means of His Divine Human (*True Christian Religion* 109). Before His advent, the hells were disorganized and invasively present, but by means of His advent the Lord subjugated the hells and brought a state of spiritual freedom to those in heaven and on earth (*Arcana Caelestia* 6914:2)

These are doctrinal profound doctrinal concepts, revealed to us in the Heavenly Doctrines, which can bring tremendous depth to our celebration of Christmas. Today, however, we reflect on the ways in which the Lord, because of His advent, can change our *present* reality for the better.

To provide context, we turn to a prophecy of His advent which declares the very purpose of His coming: “He will come and save you” (Isaiah 35:4). He has the power to save you and me in the sense of bringing us to heaven, yes, but also to save us from misery, from the negative effects of selfish actions, from harmful relationship patterns, from empty pleasures that turn into curses, from confusion and lack of confidence in the future, from fear, from a wandering existence without a central spiritual purpose. “He will come and save you”—now, no matter what the spiritual issue you are facing.

As is so often the case in the Word, when we open ourselves up to the context of this prophecy we find an amazing message just waiting for us to absorb. There is a before-and-after theme: a barren and dry wilderness that that turns into a place of pools and springs and streams, and blossoms with grasses and bulrushes; blind eyes that now see, deaf ears that now

hear, lameness turned to leaping, muteness turned into praise, and stumbling knees together with fearful hearts turned into strength and confidence.

Symbolism—the internal sense. Looking at the symbolism, it is incredibly rich with implications for our spirits and spiritual lives. On the negative side of the equation, it starts with the wilderness. The wilderness symbolizes a state of human life where not much is going on spiritually—“obscure” and with little spiritual life (*Arcana Caelestia* 2708). It could describe a person at the beginning of spiritual life, during which the “ground” of their spirit has not yet been cultivated, planted, and watered. It can also describe a state for any of us when life is hard, no matter how old or young we are. Wilderness states are times of turmoil or temptation when the Lord feels absent from our lives.

Then there is mention of “stumbling knees” and “a fearful heart.” That makes sense, right? In these wilderness times people have little or no faith (*Apocalypse Revealed* 891). Again, this could be a person who is little engaged in a life of religion or a church, who doesn’t turn to the Lord, or have any construct leading them to believe that the Lord is with them—helping them. But it can also be a time in our lives, when we lose a sense of the Lord’s presence and help, and adopt instead an “all on me” mentality. Isn’t it true that our anxiety increases in those states? We feel overwhelmed, up at night, worried about how things are possibly going to work out. “Stumbling knees” and “a fearful heart” perfectly captures these times.

It continues with blindness, deafness, lameness and muteness. Blindness is a familiar symbol for lack of understanding—for an inability to see the ideas from the Lord’s Word that can help (see *Arcana Caelestia* 2382). It could be a lack of understanding of how the Lord is present in the hardships of life. Or it could be the belief, even temporarily, of a false notion: that some people deserve more than others, that money and worldly success is the name of the game; that it’s okay to treat the ones we love with indifference or criticism because they’ll forgive us for it... How many people have reaped the negative consequences of these kinds of things only to wake up one day and realize, “I was so blind!”?

Deafness is a different kind of spiritual ailment. Now the heart is engaged, in a form of stubborn unwillingness to hear and acknowledge something from the Lord’s Word. To use the phraseology of the Writings, people in this state experience “a lack of discernment of the truth and consequently a lack of obedience” (*Arcana Caelestia* 6989). Thinking of the Lord’s advent and the need to speak to this human condition, we could think of the many people—then and now—who stubbornly hold to the notion that they do not need to repent or let go of an inherited tendency toward selfishness, or resist the warning that some things we long for are out of bounds—evil. An example: It is okay to be angry with this person and to mistreat them, because of what they did. How many of us can hold on stubbornly to these principles even when someone is telling us it’s a bad idea?

Next is spiritual lameness—“those who are in good but not genuine good because they are ignorant of truth” (*Apocalypse Explained* 455:20; cf. *Arcana Caelestia* 4302:4). This is an inability to do the Lord’s will, or to live the life that leads to heaven. That life includes spiritual devotions like prayer and attending church, actively getting rid of any enmity and selfishness, and striving to find our spiritual purpose or way of serving. How many of us go through times in our lives when we’re not doing those things?

Finally, there's spiritual muteness or "an inability to confess the Lord" (*Apocalypse Explained* 455:20, 518:4). Again, how many people do not have a sense of the Lord's providence in their lives, or a reflex of giving credit to the Lord for their blessings? All of us have the challenge of believing ourselves worthy of accolades and wish for people to notice all the good things we do. The wisest among us know and recognize that whatever good thing happens, the Lord's hand is behind it. Many of us have just focused on that with our yearly celebration of Thanksgiving.

In summary: we hear of a barren wilderness, stumbling knees and a fearful heart, blindness, deafness, lameness and muteness. It's a pretty daunting cascade of negative states of life, spiritually speaking. But that is the *before* picture. This is a prophecy of the Lord's coming. This is a message about a God who can change all that. There is the *after* picture which shows the exact opposite. "He will come and save you."

A blossoming desert. What does that mean? Whatever wilderness times we experience—of a phase of life barren of blessing and direction—can be turned into a blossoming oasis. Isaiah proclaims: "The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.... The parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water" (Isaiah 35:1,7). If we're paying attention, there comes the water of life—a refrain from Scripture—"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me" (Psalm 23:4). "Where can I go from Your spirit, and where can I flee from Your presence?" (Psalm 139:7). Or from the Heavenly Doctrines, "When the Lord is with someone, he leads that person and provides that every event, whether sad or happy, turns to that person's benefit. That is what Divine providence is" (*Arcana Caelestia* 6303).

Healing. "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened." In this context it's easy to absorb what is meant. It's the same symbolism as water—the abundance of truth available in the Word. The implication, though, is that the specific teachings in the Word that apply to the situation we are facing now come into focus. "The ears of the deaf will be unstopped." Our hearts can be inspired with an enduring willingness to obey. "The lame shall leap like the stag"—our desire to live the life of heaven, or to act as the Lord wants us to act will be fed by the Lord with energy and insight; we will serve, we will help, we will pray, we will repent. Instead of slogging through, we'll have energy and passion to devote, and a sense of deep accomplishment from the Lord. "And [our tongues] shall sing aloud" His praise"—we will give Him the credit, thanking Him for the ways in which He is blessing us.

The Way of Holiness. There's one more image in this prophecy of Isaiah that we haven't focused on. Predictably it ties it all together for us. Mentioned there is a "Way of Holiness" through the wilderness. "A highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness" (Isaiah 35:8). The clear implication is that there is one heavenly pathway set before all of us—a way of living that leads to heaven, informed by truths from the Lord's Word.

So it is that we read in the Heavenly Doctrines, "To teach the [Lord's] way' means to teach the truth according to which a person must live" (*Apocalypse Explained* 696:12). The Ten Commandments are part of that way or path (Exodus 20). The Golden Rule—to do to others as we would have them do to us—is a part of that path (Matthew 7:12). So are the Two Great

Commandments, to love God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39), and the instruction to forgive up to seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22), the call to go the extra mile (Matthew 5:41), and the requirement to look beyond the appearance and “judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24). The steps of repentance—examining oneself, recognizing one’s sins, confessing them before God, and beginning a new life—are part of that way (*True Christian Religion* 561), as is the requirement that we shun wandering lusts as an offense to the nostrils (*Conjugial Love* 49). The call to pray in on that pathway (*Arcana Caelestia* 2535), and so is the strong advice to participate in the externals of worship—going to Church and partaking of the sacraments (*Arcana Caelestia* 1618).

The promise, or the prophecy, for our lives, is that to the extent we walk in that Way of Holiness, our blindness will be healed, as will our stubborn deafness, lameness and muteness. Instead of stumbling knees and a fearful heart, we will find joy and gladness—reasons to praise the Lord for His goodness and His mercy toward us. Our wilderness states of wandering off spiritual course and feeling forlorn, will turn into beautiful oases, one after the other, on a steady path toward heaven.

It all hinges on the words right in the middle, about the Lord: “He will come and save you.” All of us have a hope of salvation—the desire one day to enter heaven. The Lord came on earth to make that possible for us. But not only that, He offers us the hope of salvation every day of our lives—salvation from misery, from confusion, from sadness and evil, from a directionless existence.

So at Christmas time, let’s marvel once again at what the Lord accomplished for us by coming on earth. A profound change took place in terms of His closeness, availability to impact our lives for good, to say nothing of the spiritually free environment He safeguards continuously. Streams of water, pools, and brooks aptly describe the abundance of truth and guidance now available, which help us to walk in the Way of Holiness with the sure knowledge that the Lord is with us. No matter what the problem or state of life we are experiencing, no matter how dire things get, no matter what the spiritual challenge, the Lord is a God who wants us to rest in this amazing prophetic declaration: “He will come and save you.” **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord’s Word: Isaiah 35:3-8; Luke 7:20-22; *Apocalypse Explained* 239:7; *Divine Providence* 60.

Isaiah 35

- ³ Strengthen the weak hands,
And make firm the stumbling knees.
- ⁴ Say to those who are fearful-hearted,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Behold, your God will come for vengeance,
For the recompense of God;
He will come and save you.”
- ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.
- ⁶ Then the lame shall leap like a stag,
And the tongue of the dumb shall sing aloud.
For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness,
And streams in the desert.
- ⁷ The parched ground shall become a pool,
And the thirsty land springs of water;
In the habitation of dragons, where each lay,
There shall be grass with reeds and bulrushes.
- ⁸ A highway shall be there, and a way,
And it shall be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean shall not pass through it,
But it shall be for them.
Whoever walks the road, although a fool,
Shall not go astray.

Luke 7

²⁰ When the men [two of the disciples of John] had come to [Jesus], they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” ²¹ And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight.

²² Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. ²³ And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”

Apocalypse Explained 239:7

[We read in Isaiah:] “Behold your God will come for vengeance, for the retribution of God will He come, and will save you; then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; waters shall break out in the wilderness, and rivers in the plain of the desert (Isa. 35:4-6). These things are said of the Lord’s coming, that then those will be saved who believe in Him. That those who are in no understanding of truth will then understand, is meant by “the eyes of the blind shall be opened;” and that those who are in no perception and will of good shall then obey and live in good, is meant by “the ears of the deaf shall be opened;” therefore it is said “waters shall break out in the wilderness, and rivers in the plain of the

desert;" "wilderness" meaning where there is no good because there is no truth, "waters" truths, and "rivers" intelligence derived from truths.

Divine Providence 60

Heaven is granted only to those who know the way to it and walk in that way. This way can be known to some extent, too, from knowing the character of those who constitute heaven, and from knowing that no one becomes an angel or comes into heaven except those who bring an angelic character with them from the world. Present in an angelic character, moreover, is a knowledge of the way from walking in it, and a walking in the way through a knowledge of it.