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Sermon Text: Isaiah 35:4-7a

## CHRIST STRENGTHENS OUR SHAKY KNEES

It's the late 1800s in America. Imagine yourself taking part in a wagon train during the post-Civil War westward expansion across the Great Plains, day 33. The soles of your shoes are worn through. It is hot, relentlessly hot, as your wagon seems to crawl across the vast, waterless expanse. Nowhere any shade. Always the taste of dust in your mouth. Will your food supplies last? Rattlesnakes abound. The isolation is crushing. And it's no relief to see human shapes appear on the horizon. They may be army deserters or ruffians or a band of Oglala warriors looking to pillage your belongings or even kill you. What if a horse kicks your leg as you are harnessing it to the wagon so that you have a gaping, bleeding cut that needs stitches? What if you twist your ankle? There is no one to turn to out there, no safe-place. You are on your own.

I wonder, did they ever get weak-kneed -either so sapped of energy or so fearful of dangers that they felt too shaky to take another step forward? I wonder how they encouraged themselves to keep going. Did they gather around the campfire at night and refresh themselves with thoughts of how beautiful it would be once they reached the mountains? Or what a lovely farm they'd build once they claimed their tract of land? Would they anticipate the riches in gold they were going to mine or the plentiful game they would hunt? Perhaps they idealized it with songs like, "Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play, where seldom is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day?" Is this how they strengthened their shaky knees?

This is similar to the picture painted in Isaiah chapter 35 - a picture intended to encourage us. For even though you and I may not be on any kind of physical wilderness trek, life in general can have us feeling weak-kneed and shaky. God wants to refresh us with this truth, that Christ strengthens our shaky knees.

It was not the American Wild West, but it was Jerusalem about 600 years before Christ, a smoking pile of rubble. Those citizens who survived the destruction were rounded up for a forced march across the arid wilderness to the faraway land of Babylon. It was through the prophet Isaiah that God provided them a type of poetic encouragement to lift their spirits. It was not a wistful song like “O Give Me a Home.” Rather, these were the words of the Holy Spirit holding out refreshment connected to Christ to strengthen their shaky knees.

And being the words of God they have the same power of Christ to strengthen our shaky knees even today.

Imagine your wrists are bound and you are being pulled along with a string of captives tied to a horse. Maybe you are feverish with an infected injury. These invaders are fierce. You're scared. Isaiah wrote, *Strengthen the weak hands, and make the shaky knees steady. Tell 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.* That is a promise. And God kept His promise. God took care of His people in Babylon and after 70 years the Babylonian Empire collapsed and the Israelite captives were set free to go home.

No matter what gives us shaky knees - from Covid to climate change to the potential for another 9-11 down to the playground bully and a billion things in between - hasn't Jesus promised us: *In this world you will have many troubles, but take heart I have overcome the world?* We can trust that is true even now. But when will we see the total rescue of His believers more clearly than on the Last Day when the Bible says all His enemies will be placed under His feet?

You see, by His death on the cross and His empty tomb, Jesus hasn't redeemed us merely to a hollow success and ease of living in this world like what Joel Osteen promises. Jesus has redeemed us out of this sin-ruined world. As we hear the prophecy in Isaiah 35 we recognize that it was fulfilled by Jesus during His earthly ministry, but

we also get the sense that something more encompassing is being described. Listen again to Isaiah chapter 35: *Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unplugged. The 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. The burning sand will become a pool, and in the thirsty ground there will be springs of water.*

These words paint a picture of a place where everything is lush and green and verdant and where there is only good health and strength and joy and well-being. Even those Israelite exiles returning home from Babylon recognized that when they reached Jerusalem it wouldn't be lush. It would still be lying in ruins. Nor would they be free of problems after that. But with these words, God is lifting up our eyes to something beyond - the new world, the new life to which Christ has redeemed us. He gives us the promise of eternal salvation to strengthen our shaky knees.

Yet, our God is so amazing that He doesn't merely hold this future promise before us like some mountain range on the horizon. He brings it to us here and now to refresh us on our way and to strengthen our shaky knees for the continuing journey. Consider what happens in a worship service. God's salvation comes bubbling up like a spring when the pastor announces that our sins are forgiven. He showers us like a refreshing rain when we hear His Word in the Scripture lessons and in the Psalm. He holds the cool, quenching cup of salvation to our lips when we drink in the sermon. Streams of His mercy come flowing over us when we receive the Lord's Supper. And all around us are the reeds and grasses and flowering beauty of God's people thriving and rejoicing together, not with cowboy songs but with hymns to encourage each other in the Lord.

Here it is, even now, the salvation of our Lord, the joy of heaven for you to drink deeply and to be refreshed and to have shaky knees are strengthened.