

Several greeted me this morning stating that “we need Good News” it has been such a hard week. Twice in recent weeks, people have come to me at Coffee Hour stating: Most preachers tell us what to think; but As a Preacher, you raise questions and do not give us answers! Do you expect us to come up with answers for ourselves?

In 1962, Bob Dylan wrote an Arlo Guthrie-type song, which was adopted by Joan Baez, then Peter, Paul and Mary. Bob Dylan claimed he wrote the questions of these verses in only 10 minutes...

“How many roads must a man walk down, before you can call him a man?”

“How many years must a mountain exist, before it is washed to the sea?”

“Yes, and how many ears must one man have, before he can hear people cry?

How many deaths will it take; ‘til we know that too many people have died?”

The refrain to every verse “The answer my friend is blowin’ in the wind, the answer is blowin’ in the wind.”

Bob Dylan described that this was not a protest song. Not a “They will know we are Christians by our love” or “We shall overcome some day”. What surprises me, is that while “The answer is blowin’ in the wind” could be reference to God in the Holy Spirit; NOT one church hymnal of any denomination or Pentecostal church has ever included this song! On my shelves are hymnbooks from the Catholic Church, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Disciples, United Church of Christ, Church of God, Nazarene, Unitarian, Pentecostal, Reformed and Free Churches, Presbyterian as well as Young Life, and Youth Choirs, none of which include this song. So perhaps this is not a Religious Hymn, but I do believe that Refrain does provide a faithful response to many of our Life circumstance... In essence, when I cannot explain and have no answer...

“The answer my friend is blowin’ in the wind, the answer is blowin’ in the wind.

The easiest application of Isaiah 35, for us in the Desert of Southern Tucson, is to affirm our reality: “The wilderness and dry land are glad, the desert is rejoicing in blossom, crocuses are blossoming abundantly, with joy and singing.”

Yet how do we answer friends and family in N’Orleans recovering from Ida, on the 16th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, which at that time was the most devastating storm in American History?

When we receive plentiful rains, how do we interpret wild fires spreading across California and Nevada?

When the Island of Haiti is afflicted with Earth Quake followed by Tropical Storm?

“The answer my friend is blowin’ in the wind, the answer is blowin’ in the wind.”

What do we as a community of faith say to one another, to the world, about the longest war in our Nation’s history ending after 20 years, 2 trillion dollars borrowed, 2450 American Soldiers lives sacrificed... our Nation simply walking away; and those selected and trained to lead, abandoning all responsibility? Our fears and anxieties have ushered in reminders of 20 years ago, when women were prevented from receiving any education, were raped, beaten and stoned for what we envision as minor domestic offenses, and when Osama bin Laden led others from the Taliban to attack us on 9/11. How can we turn-off that reality or make sense of it; reading Isaiah 35 describing that miraculously God will strengthen weak hands, make firm feeble knees, saying to those of a fearful heart: “Be strong, fear not! He will come and save”?

To prevent a superficial reading of Isaiah 35, we need to begin by recognizing that North Americans in the 21st Century have a far shorter attention span than our ancestors in faith, some of whom worshipped for 3-7 hours at a time, others instead of reading a few verses read an entire Book of the Bible at a setting. Which made sense, because until the 4th Century, there was no numbering of Chapters or Verses and the Hebrew language had no punctuation. These breaks of Chapters and Verses were added to allow readers smaller sections to read and find their places.

The Book of Isaiah appears to have been written by at least two and more likely three authors over 70-100 years.

Chapters 1-39 describe Divine Judgement that is to come to each nation. Chapter 40-60 prophesying that God would send a savior, that Israel would become a Suffering Servant atoning for all the peoples of the world. The final chapters affirming that God would return Israel to the Promised Land.

Some believers imagine that the Editor of Isaiah mistakenly placed Chapter 35 here, and that this should instead come later in 2nd Isaiah as if by a different author.

Most of us recognize this passage from Advent, where Chapter 35 describes The Coming of the Lord!

However, identification of this Chapter changes when we read this contextually as a response to Chapter 34, which happens to be a passage never appointed for us in modern worship. Chapter 34 prophesies: When left to our own devices, the world of War, and Nations fighting for submission is destroyed. Mountains will be covered with corpses, rivers turned into pitch, and the land into brimstone. From generation to generation the whole land will lay in waste. This land shall be possessed by the Hawk and Porcupine, Jackals and Ostrich, wild beasts and hyenas. In response to that devastation and desolation, the desecration of the land by war, comes Chapter 35 prophesying of the Eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped.

We listened to News reporters this week describing Afghanistan has only two futures, based on the past:

There are those of us among the allied Nations who are tired of endless War, throwing bodies and lives and dollars at a problem without end. For Centuries Afghanistan has been called the Graveyard of Empires. This was the Old Testament land of Assyria and Babylon.

There are also those among us who envision that withdraw of troops as unleashing Warlords and brutality, terrorists and human atrocity as existed 20 years ago.

Perhaps I am naïve, this would not be the first time that a preacher had a revelation of a seemingly impossible future! For 20 years, a full generation, Afghanistan has known constant warfare and fighting, rivers becoming nothing but pitch, mountains covered by corpses. During this same generation, girls have gone to school, women have owned their own businesses and become part of their Nation's legislature. Schools and Hospitals were built and served their communities.

Is it too much to believe that the horrors committed under those who were blind and deaf to anything else, might be challenged by the seeds which have been planted?

That women who were treated as lame, might leap like a deer?

That the tongues which were made to be silent might ululate for joy?

While we have seen many images of older men with grey beards, the majority of their population is now under 20 years of age, having never known a time without war. Maybe, ultimately, as this generation question their future, then Lions of war will no longer be allowed, ravenous beasts will not be found there.

"The answer my friend, is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind..."

500 years after the original prophesy of Isaiah 35, this was that portion of the scroll of Isaiah that Jesus read at the Synagogue at Nazareth. But the Empire and people in those times could not lay down their fear and hatred to believe. The answer my friend was blowin' in the wind. The Day of Pentecost.

20 years ago in July, my wife and I brought our sons on a cross-country train ride to the Grand Canyon. While we were gone 4 Refugees from South Sudan called "The Lost Boys" arrived at that church from Africa. Members of the church used a Panel truck like our Patio Sale truck to transport all the donations people had given, clothing, beds, dressers, pots, pans and cooking supplies to the apartment we rented

for them. After unpacking a household and sharing Pizza, one of the young men asked: We appreciate all that you have given us, but the one thing we need most, we do not see, "Where are our Bibles?" We as the church had forgotten, doesn't everyone have a Bible? But they had lived all of their lives in Civil War, trusting only God had kept them alive. That Sunday, I returned from Arizona, we presented them Bibles.

Two months later on September 11th our world changed, as the Trade Towers were attacked. I do not know how that effected your communities, we were in the same State only hours away by car. Many of us for work or pleasure had been to Manhattan recently. That evening, after a day of leading Grief Counseling and Prayer sessions at factories and businesses, we invited the whole community to worship ecumenically. It was standing room only, as all of the community's clergy shared in worship and prayer and I preached: that just as there was a yesterday there would be a tomorrow. After the worship service had begun, these four 6'6" to 7' tall African warriors entered the Sanctuary. At the end of the Service, one of these young men shouted, "These terrorists are the same ones we tried to escape, these lions need to be killed." I replied, "No. We too had hoped you had escaped this by coming to America, but there is no place that is safe from terrorism and war. We have to trust that God will make a difference."

"The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind."