

Joy in the Desert
Isaiah 35:1-10
Third Sunday in Advent
December 14, 2014

Introduction – The Upside to a Desert Experience

December can be a very challenging time of the year. If you're like me, and I suspect many of you are, you hardly had a night at home last week. Add to your busyness, financial pressures, relationship strains, colds and flu, and the onset of a long winter... Well, December can be challenging for just about everyone. But if you consider people who struggle with serious illness, grief of a loved one or serious depression, December can become a desert of despair and despondency. Most everyone knows what a desert experience is. It's a trying season in life when there isn't much to be joyful about. But emotional deserts have played a part in the biblical story. Moses ran away from Egypt and spent forty years tending sheep in the Sinai desert in preparation to lead the nation of Israel through the same ground to the Promised Land. Jesus spent forty days in the barren wastelands east of Jerusalem just before he launched his ministry. Paul spent three years in Arabia shortly after his conversion where the Holy Spirit shaped his mind and spirit to become the apostle to the Gentiles and the author of nearly half of the New Testament.

The desert is a harsh and hostile place: hot in the daytime and cold at night. Its defining feature is the scarcity of water, the most essential substance necessary for life. But there is an upside. When water does come to the desert, there is no other place like it that experiences such a rush of refreshment. There's even a wonderful devotional that was inspired by the phenomenon of desert renewal called *Streams in the Desert*. In a very challenging season of our life together, Diane and I found great strength from that little devotional.

As I mentioned last week, I was privileged to spend a good deal of my childhood in the desert. My mom hated it, but, as a kid, I loved it. I guess I didn't know any better. I lived in the Mojave Desert of California for a number of years and I really don't have any desire to return there. It was really barren. But the desert of Southern New Mexico and West Texas around El Paso was



another story altogether. I've got fond memories. We lived on the edge of town where the three of us boys could play out in the desert with our friends. We crawled in the dirt playing army trying to ambush each other. I caught lizards and a few snakes for my mom to enjoy at home. My oldest brother was the best snake catcher. He would bring home five foot bull snakes wrapped around his body hoping to get a scream out my mom. She just told him to take it out back before it pooped on the rug. Not so with his friend's mom. You could hear her screams two blocks away. Great childhood.

But the neatest thing was when it would rain in the late summer. The rains were usually monsoon storms and the water would come down in buckets. Our street was on a significant hill and the water would rush down the gutters, creating three foot high rooster tails where it hit the curb at the driveway. My father had built wood-frame and canvas kayaks for us which we used to "shoot the rapids" going down the street. All the water converged at a large ditch by the elementary school to make a small lake. After the storm, the magic happened. Bull frogs would come out of hiding, find a mate, and lay their eggs in the makeshift lake. Lizards and snakes would come out of their holes. It was the very best time to catch them. I remember catching a very large horned lizard – we called them "horney toads" and they were prized as pets because they were the easiest to feed – that must have been nearly ten inches long. It took two of my little 10-year old hands to hold it and it seemed like the ground shook when it ran.

But the smell... Oh my! There is nothing else on earth like it. For nearly a year the sagebrush and mesquite bushes had oozed their oils onto their leaves. And now, with the rain, the fragrant aromas filled the air with freshness. It didn't last long. But the smell of the desert after a rainstorm is one of the most pleasant experiences your nose will ever encounter. I wish I could duplicate it for you, but nature keeps some secrets to herself.

This wonderful physical phenomenon has a profound spiritual parallel. After spending days, months, or years in desolation, God's showers of blessing are at last poured out, bringing with them the overpowering release of extravagant joy. Today some of you desperately need that deep refreshment in your desert experience. I've got great news for you. You can receive those refreshing showers God's promise found in our text today.



Great Reversals

Isaiah 35:1-10 (NLT)

Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days.

The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses.

Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers

and singing and joy!

The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon,

as lovely as Mount Carmel or the plain of Sharon.

There the Lord will display his glory,

the splendor of our God. (vs. 1-2)

Isaiah, of course, is speaking to the Jewish people and he was foretelling about a great reversal in the order of all things. Unlike the passage that we read last week in Chapter 40, this prophecy is not referring to the Jewish return from exile, but rather for the day when the Messiah comes and the Kingdom of God breaks into our broken world. It's important that we understand the big picture here. Because of sin, the good world that God created in Genesis 1 was turned upside down. Our world is broken. But central to the message of the Bible and the Gospel is that God is making all things new. The wars and evil in this world? That's because of sin. Broken relationships and broken people? All because of our sin. Even the damaging weather patterns that we experience and the pesky weeds that choke our gardens...all because our world is broken. But when the Kingdom of God comes, all of our broken world will be made whole.

Isaiah opens his prophecy with geographic reversals. The desert will become an oasis. The abandoned land will become a resort. "Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns; let men their songs employ. While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy!" Everything. Everything will change when Messiah comes, beginning with the landscape.

Physical and Emotional Healing

With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands,

and encourage those who have weak knees.

Say to those with fearful hearts,

"Be strong, and do not fear,

for your God is coming to destroy your enemies.



He is coming to save you.” (vs. 3-4)

God will strengthen those who are physically and emotionally weak. You might suffer from some physical ailment – or simply you might be getting old. For the Christian, there’s a cure for old age. God’s gonna heal you some day. There are many in our society – in this place this morning – who suffer in silence. Mental and emotional illness still has too much of a stigma in our culture, compounding the pain, suffering, and darkness that many people know. One day, God’s gonna heal you. All of your anxiety; all of your pain will be turned into joy. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come; let earth receive her king. Let ev’ry heart prepare him room.”

Jesus is the Fulfillment of this Joyous Prophecy

And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind
and unplug the ears of the deaf.

The lame will leap like a deer,
and those who cannot speak will sing for joy! (vs. 5-6a)

A while after Jesus had launched his ministry, disciples of John the Baptist came to him and asked if he was the Messiah promised in the Book of Isaiah. Jesus replied directly,

“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.”

Luke 7:23 (ESV)

Through Jesus, the great reversal promised by Isaiah – the coming of the Kingdom of God – was turning the broken world upside down. Isaiah again likens the great reversal to the wonderful refreshment of the desert:

Springs will gush forth in the wilderness,
and streams will water the wasteland.

The parched ground will become a pool,
and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.

Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish
where desert jackals once lived. (vs. 6b-7)



Moral Healing

And a great road will go through that once deserted land.

It will be named the Highway of Holiness.

Evil-minded people will never travel on it.

It will be only for those who walk in God's ways;
fools will never walk there.

Lions will not lurk along its course,
nor any other ferocious beasts.

There will be no other dangers.

Only the redeemed will walk on it. (vs. 8-9)

When the Messiah comes there will be renewal of the land, physical and emotional healing, and perhaps, most important of all, a great moral reversal. Evil will be overthrown and righteousness will prevail. The foundation for that great reversal has already been laid through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By his resurrection, Jesus has defeated the power of sin and death. (And we will profoundly proclaim and celebrate that through Christian baptism this morning!) "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found."

The Result of Messiah's Coming

Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return.

They will enter Jerusalem singing,
crowned with everlasting joy.

Sorrow and mourning will disappear,
and they will be filled with joy and gladness. (vs. 10)

Is not this the good news that we need?

Crowned with everlasting joy...

Sorrow and mourning will disappear...

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent. Liturgical churches call it "Gaudite Sunday" – the Sunday of Joy. That's the meaning of the pink candle. Joy is the offspring of Peace. The Hebrews had a

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word for peace that means much more than just the absence of conflict. It's the word *Shalom* and it means that everything is as it should be. Everything has been made right and in alignment with God's plan and purpose. It has the idea of fullness. *Shalom* is what this passage was describing. But *Shalom* – peace – and her lively offspring, Joy, comes only to those who receive God's rule and reign in their lives.

“He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love...”

Lighting of the Third Advent Candle

Reader A

The Advent wreath is a circle with no beginning and no end. It is a symbol of God's unending love and faithfulness.

Reader B

Isaiah the prophet calls us to prepare for the coming of Jesus by making straight all that is crooked.

Reader A

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Everyone

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

[Light candle]

Reader B

Let us prepare for Jesus, the Christ, who is anointed by God to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.



Reader A

For as a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Prayer of Hope

O Sun of Righteousness,

You shine with warm brightness and clean freshness, chasing the fearsome shadows of the night away; enliven your people with the joy that comes from visions of your peace and righteousness until you bring all things into the harmony of your kingdom – for your name's sake. Amen.

