

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Isaiah 35:1-10 (NRSV)

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus [2] it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

[3] Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

[4] Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you."

[5] Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

[6] then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

[7] the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

[8] A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

[9] No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;

they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
[10] And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Matthew 11:2-11 (NRSV)

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples [3] and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" [4] Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: [5] the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. [6] And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

[7] As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? [8] What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. [9] What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. [10] This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

[11] Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

THE LIVING DESERT

Long ago Walt Disney made a movie entitled *The Living Desert*. It's been a long time since I saw it, but I do remember an emphasis upon how empty the desert seemed. An unearthly silence dominated that dry and seemingly deserted place.

But, then the sky turned black, and a single drop of rain fell. First it came slowly, and then it began to pour. Through the magic of time lapse photography we were able to see an almost miraculous change. Little tufts of

green began to appear. Flowers carpeted the once dead desert floor. Seeds that had been dormant for years sprouted. The desert bloomed.

Our lesson for today tells us, “That’s what it’s going to be like when God comes and brings salvation to His people. The desert will bloom.”

THE DESERT OF DESPAIR

Now the desert doesn’t bloom very often. And some deserts are so vast and so dry that they seem beyond renewal.

Such was the case for God’s people long ago. The cruel armies of Babylon had laid waste to the Promised Land and had forcibly relocated God’s people. They were marched across the desert until they arrived in Babylon. As the captivity wore on year after year, the people began to lose hope.

Psalm 137 captures the despair of these captives. In verse 1 and 2 we read,

By the rivers of Babylon--
 there we sat down and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion.
[2] On the willows there
 we hung up our harps.

It’s easy to understand why they were ready to hang up their hope on the weeping willow tree. Just look at a map of the Middle East, and you will see that a great dry desert separated the exiled Jews from their homeland. It was a desert that had never blossomed, never bloomed.

GOD’S PROMISE

And yet that is exactly what God promised His people. The desert would blossom and rejoice. The barren hillsides would be covered with the majestic cedars of Lebanon. The burning sands would become an oasis.

Not only would the desert bloom, not only would disabled nature be restored, the coming of God’s kingdom would also be a time when disabled human beings would be restored as well. Salvation would come to those on the

margins of society. The blind would see, the deaf would hear, the mute would speak, and the lame would leap for joy!

Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggeman notes that it was in the darkness of exile that Israel's prophets expressed some of their most sweeping, extravagant claims for the greatness, power, and triumph of God. The world around them was bereft of life giving water and hope. But, in that dry land the prophet proclaimed, "God will come and save you. The desert will bloom."

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

It certainly sounds like a Walt Disney movie but not one his nature films. It sounds like one of his fairy tales. I can just hear the objections of those who had already hung up their harps in Babylon.

"This message sounds too good to be true. You say that the desert will bloom? You say that the Lord will prepare a highway that will lead us home? You say that those broken by life will be healed.

You say that on this road no one will get lost ... even the husbands who refuse to ask for directions? Now that is a fantasy! You can wish upon a star if you want, but some of us want to be more realistic. Let's just weep for what used to be and move on with our lives."

Building a highway is never an easy task, and building a highway through the desert seems well nigh impossible.

And yet this is the season when we remember that nothing is impossible for God. This is the season when we sing and rejoice and talk about peace on earth even when there is so much evidence to the contrary. This is the season when we expect the unexpected, and hope for a miracle.

It's strange, but this season of joy intensifies the pain for many people. When you have had a bad year, when you feel all alone and isolated, everyone wishing you a Merry Christmas just makes it seem worse. How can everyone else be so happy when I am so sad?

ADVENT EXPECTATIONS

I would suggest more of you feel that way this year and every year than you might expect. You're not alone. And I would also suggest that this is why the reason the season of Advent is so important.

It's not about a mindless celebration but a mindful longing for a better world, a yearning for a Savior. Every year there are many who long for a world that is different. We long for world in which hurts are healed instead of exploited. We long for a world in which everyone is allowed to go home and feel at home.

Several weeks ago we were discussing a song that became popular during World War II, "I'll Be Home for Christmas". One of the members of our Sunday school class said that in fact her brother sent home a tape of him singing that song one Christmas during the war.

It was good to hear his voice, but it was also sad to hear his voice as well. His absence that Christmas left a void in their life, and they (like everyone else at that time) wondered if he ever would make it home for Christmas.

Is homecoming possible? Or is the salvation we seek only a dream?

When I first entered the ministry, I was not prepared for the sheer number of people who would be absolutely overwhelmed by negative feelings during the Christmas season. At the time I was having personal problems as well.

One night during Advent I was talking with a couple who was having marital problems. It was a particularly unsuccessful session. The husband stormed out of my office, and the wife apologized and then tried to chase her husband down in the cold night.

That seemed to sum it all up for me ... the anger, the hopelessness and the cold dark night. But, for some reason I was led to enter the sanctuary and turn on the beautiful Christmas lights. The contrast between the decorations of the season and the pain in my own life and the lives of my congregation was stark.

Literally on the verge of tears, for some reason I made my way to the pulpit and began to sing. I sing an Advent hymn to an empty sanctuary. “O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here; until the Son of God appear.”

But, then I reached the chorus the words seemed to come from upon,

“Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!”

The words echoed off the walls and straight into my heart. God had spoken to me through those ancient words. He knew my pain and the pain of those around me. He knew that we needed saving, and that salvation was on the way.

GOD WILL MAKE A WAY

As I wrote the sermon this week I thought of another song, not an Advent song but a praise and worship song entitled “God Will Make a Way”. (I’ve printed the words to that song in the bulletin so that you can possibly use them for personal reflection on the message of Advent this coming week.)

The song begins, “God will make a way where there seems to be no way.” I think that might be the best summary of the Advent promise I’ve ever heard. God will make a way where there seems to be no way.

The God who created the heavens and the earth can remake you. The God who delivered His people from the slavery of the Egyptians can deliver you. The God who came to earth in the Christ child can come to your home this very day.

You might be living in the desert. Everything in your life might be dry and dead. You may have decided to forgo celebrating and singing this year because it just wouldn’t seem right.

If that’s true, you’ve forgotten the story. You’ve forgotten the story of a God who makes the desert bloom, the blind see and even raises the dead. You’ve forgotten the God who can make a world out of chaos. You’ve forgotten the

God who can turn an instrument of torture and death into a symbol of eternal salvation.

God has long been in the business of making a holy way home. He did it for people who were exiled in Babylon, and He will do it for you and me as well. God will make a way.

ARE YOU THE ONE?

Such a promise is often hard to hear when things are not going so well.

One of our Bible lessons last week was the story of John the Baptist. John prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah, and he sounded sure of his message. He was full of fire and brimstone in his approach. Repent now, for the kingdom of God was at hand.

But, this week John sounds a new uncertain note. We are farther into John's story, and things are not going so well. John has been imprisoned for his fiery preaching and will soon lose his life. In the darkness of his prison cell John sends two of his disciples to Jesus with an important question, "Are you the one ... or should we wait for another?"

Jesus was doing miraculous things, but he was not exactly what John expected in a Messiah. John expected more baptism by fire and less love for the enemy. John expected more power and conquest and less turning of the other cheek.

From John's perspective, this was no academic question. He needed to know. His salvation depended upon it. "Jesus, are you the Messiah or not? Your ministry doesn't line up with my expectations."

Jesus said,
"Go tell John what you see. The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear.

The dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them."

That sounds a whole lot like Isaiah's vision doesn't it?

JOHN'S EXPECTATIONS AND OURS

Jesus said that John was the greatest prophet the world had ever seen. But, even John didn't understand the coming kingdom completely. The kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus was a big surprise to the people. It was greater, and it was different from what they expected.

It occurs to me that our expectations rarely match reality. Sometimes we expect too much. Family holiday gatherings are seldom the idyllic get-togethers that we would like them to be. Every year many people feel an after Christmas letdown. Like the old song people ask, "Is that all there is?"

We expect too much of the holiday season. We think that a season of gift giving and good will can make a difference. But, in many cases all it does is emphasize our feeling of emptiness and loneliness. At the end of the season we ask, "Is that all there is or should we look for something more, something greater?"

But, when it comes to Christ, when it comes to the Messiah who promises to enter our life this season, I think that our disappointment comes from expecting too little.

I look at all the little plastic manger scenes in my neighborhood that are situated beside the gigantic seven foot blowup Santa and Snowmen globes that have little snow flakes coming down inside. (You should see my dogs jump when one of those inflatable signs of the season rises at dusk as we take our walk! That does brighten my spirits!)

But, when I look at those decorations I also wonder, "What are expecting when we celebrate in this way? What kind of Jesus is this plastic Jesus?" A plastic Jesus is a Jesus that we can conveniently store in our attic until the holiday season arrives. Then we can dust him and his parents off, plug in their lights, and place them on our lawn for a season.

Is this the Jesus we want or should we look for another?

FALL ON YOUR KNEES

I think you know the answer to that. We aren't looking for a plastic Jesus. We aren't looking for a Jesus that we can control, a Jesus that we can conveniently take out of the box and light up when we want our spirits brightened.

We're looking for a different Jesus. We're looking for a Jesus who can make the desert bloom. We're looking for a Jesus who can make the blind see.

We're looking for a Jesus whose glory can light up the eastern sky with an unearthly glow that will scare not only our dogs but also us. This Jesus is not child's play. This Jesus is the very image of the invisible God. This Jesus is the salvation of the Almighty.

As the popular Christmas anthem, O Holy Night puts it, "Fall on your knees."

Christmas is about the birth of a child, but contrary to popular belief, Christmas is not just for children. Christmas is for everyone. And Christmas is a great challenge.

Everyone loves to talk about the sweet baby Jesus. But, we know Jesus as more than a baby. Jesus grew up and lived out the promise made at his birth.

Jesus' kingdom was a kingdom of peace and justice. Jesus' kingdom was not about what we wanted and what we expected of God but about what God wanted and expected of us.

GOD'S WAY

In Isaiah's vision, the road out of the desert is referred to as the Holy Way. In other words, if God's people were to ever make it out of exile they would have to repent of their old ways and dedicate themselves to God's way. They had to go in a different direction in order to find their way out of the wilderness.

It's the same for us. Jesus is not necessarily the Messiah we expect or want. Jesus is the Messiah we need. And we have to follow God's way as revealed in Jesus.

I've mentioned Cesar Milan before; Caesar is good at rehabilitating unbalanced dogs and training humans to be better "pack leaders". Caesar's TV show on the National Geographic Channel is called "The Dog Whisperer". On my vacation I had the opportunity to read Caesar's latest book that is entitled *Caesar's Way*.

According to Caesar almost everything that we do when it comes to our dogs is wrong. For example, when a dog misbehaves what do we almost always do? We gruffly call the dog's name. For an unbalanced dog this does nothing. It just adds to the excitement as we shout louder and louder. We expect our dog to respond to our verbal command, but this is not what dogs normally do.

Caesar's way is to respond to our dogs as they are ... not as we would like them to be. If a dog is unbalanced, one way to control the behavior is to come toward the dog with a sense of calm, assertive energy. A dog responds more to sight than sound and can be more easily controlled by a person who works with their natural instincts.

But, it's very hard for dog owners to adjust to Caesar's way. They are so used to yelling at their disobedient dogs and getting upset about their bad behavior that they cannot envision a different way.

But, when they do make the transition, the change in their animals, and more importantly, the change in their own life can be profound. Caesar thinks that when we learn to get in touch with the instincts of the animals that live with us we get in touch with a long dormant instinctual side of our own behavior.

In a much greater sense, we must adjust our thinking when it comes to the Messiah. We have become so conditioned to a season of commercialism with a little fuzzy talk about the sweet baby Jesus, that we have a hard time hearing about the angels, the angels whose glorious presence causes us to fall on our knees. We are so used to a plastic Jesus that we are not ready for the flesh and blood Messiah who invades our world in a new way.

SING A NEW SONG

Someone said last week that she found my sermon interesting, but she wasn't sure how to apply it. What was she supposed to do? I can understand her feeling. I felt the same way as I attempted to write a sermon on that poetic passage from Isaiah. How can you apply poetry to "real" life?

There are some passages of Scripture that are more practical in nature, and we need those passages. When the Bible says, for example, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" that's what it means. The application is obvious.

But, there are other passages that are designed to lift our hearts and hopes beyond the ordinary. There are passages that artistically suggest a greater way, a greater salvation through the medium of poetry and song.

The last line of our lesson from Isaiah envisions the exiles returning home to Zion. Those who had hung up their harps pulled them out again. They begin to sing, and joy replaced sorrow and sighing.

Maybe this gives us a clue about how we can put this promise into practice.

One practical thing we can do to bring the power of God's salvation into focus is to make the poetry and music of salvation a part of our lives.

As I said before, I've printed the words to a praise and worship song in your bulletin, God Will Make a Way. As a response to today's sermon, I want you to look at those words as Jeannie sings the song through one time, and then I want you to sing along with her the second time.

And then I want you to do one more thing. I want you to take that bulletin home this week. (Don't leave it in the pew or place it in the narthex!) Take that bulletin home and as an Advent devotional sing that song, God Will Make a Way. Sing by yourself when you feel alone. Sing when the pressures of the season start to get to you. Sing with a friend who has been having trouble.

According to Isaiah this is God's song. And according to Jesus it is the song that He came to earth to sing.

It is a song of salvation and hope that will last forever. It is a song about God's way.

It takes great faith to sing in the desert. But, one day my friends, even the desert will bloom.

Amen.