

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Desert Blossoms”

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Isaiah 35:1-10

³⁵The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ²it 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.

One of my all-time favorite stretches of road to drive is I-80 from Salt Lake City to Wendover, Nevada. It takes about ninety minutes to two hours, depending on how fast you drive, and because of the solitude of the drive and the straight path of the road, you can drive rather fast. It was such a lonely yet smooth road that it was a great place to take a student driver who needs to get some freeway miles on their driving log! The road begins in the green and flat Salt Lake valley eventually passing right beside by the fragrant waters of the Great Salt Lake. Next you travel by the nearby peaks of the Oquirrh and Stansbury mountain ranges. The Army's chemical storage and disposal base at Tooele and the Air Force's bombing test range are on either side of the freeway. And after that, there is nothing but an abandoned motel or gas station, every twenty miles. It is rocky, brown, desolate land. Eventually you drive by the Bonneville Salt Flats. There are still no signs of life but the scenery changes to nothing but white and gray sand and salt. The terrain is as strange to the eye as the surface of Mars. The faraway mountains appear to just float on the horizon. Nothing grows there, except for a few weeds that survive near the pavement of the freeway. It is pure desolation, as far as the eye can see.

But as you continue west, suddenly things change, if only for a brief moment. There is Wendover, Nevada and a temporary oasis of vivid life and vibrant color. There are the bright, almost gaudy lights of the casinos. There is the lush green grass and beautiful flowers of the golf courses, lawns and resorts. The advent of irrigation and gambling has changed a part of the lifeless Utah and Nevada desert into a place of energy.

We tend to think of the desert as a place of wilderness. It is a place we would rather avoid. It is desolate and without the things of life that we enjoy or find necessary. It is a place that reminds us how vulnerable and weak we really are. We might run out of food and water there. We could be overcome by the heat of the day or left frozen by the dropping temperatures of the night. We could be attacked by wild animals there. Yet people who live near the desert tell me that despite all appearances, the desert isn't always brown and dead and lifeless. In the springtime, the melting snow and seasonal rain produces a great blooming. Flowers burst forth from between rocks. Blossoms appear almost overnight. God produces beauty and abundance with just a few drops of water.

From brown to green. That is the picture painted by the prophet Isaiah in our Scripture lesson this morning. If you were to briefly look at the preceding text, 34th chapter of Isaiah, you will find some rather dark and depressing images. The

vengeance of the Lord. Streams turning into pitch and soil into sulfur. Thorns and thistles and nettles growing over the land. Jackals and ostriches and hyenas and wildcats and goat-demons (I don't know what that is but I wouldn't want to meet a goat-demon!) inhabit the land. Buzzards gather with their mates. This certainly sounds like the Nevada-Utah salt flats and desert!

But in our reading today, from the 35th chapter, the brown of the wasteland is transformed into the green paradise. Wilderness is turned into lush farmland. A smooth road is fashioned where once desert sands blew. And it doesn't stop there. It seems as if all of creation is changed! Human beings are transformed. Hands and knees and hearts are made strong. Eyes and ears and limbs and tongues are healed. "Here is your God," and this God is one with power to overcome the wickedness, disease, and disorder that must be challenged to bring in a new day of possibilities. The radical reverses in all of creation provide a basis for hope in God's power to change the course of humanity.

There are moments in life in which we may feel lost in the wilderness. Life can be like a desert, dried up, brown and lifeless. Somewhere, sometime, each of us will walk that desert path. We let fear take over. We let hope fade. A difficulty in a relationship can cause us to feel abandoned. A sudden illness can leave us feeling desolate. A change in a job situation and the loss of income leaves us feeling empty and deserted. Periods of worry, depression and loneliness sap our energy and makes us unproductive. These are desert experiences when vitality and purpose tend to be absent and we begin to believe we are stranded in a desolate tract that is the wasteland of uncertainty.

Part of our waiting and preparing this Advent season is to intentionally look at ourselves and our world through the eyes of faith. The prophet Isaiah points to a God who promises are always to be trusted. Our God makes a way when we thought there was no way. Even in our despair about the future, our God can make our brownest desert blossom and lead us from the most bewildering wilderness back to the safety and promise of home. When we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, we will know that some pretty amazing things are possible.

Rev. Edward Markquart tells a wonderful story of a woman in her forties who went to visit a dementia patient in her eighties at the local nursing home. "How are you?" the younger woman asked. "Just fine," replied the older. Then there was a long silence. About five minutes of long silence. Then the older lady said, "Where did the leaves go?" The young woman responded, "It's fall. The leaves have fallen." Another long silence. The older lady asked, "Do you have a daughter?" The young woman answered, "Yes. My daughter is twelve years old." "Do you have any sons?" "Yes, my son is sixteen." Another long silence. "What is his name?" "His name is Mark. He is a tall boy, almost six feet four." "My, that is a tall boy." Yet another long period of silence. It was tough, like unwanted duty, the visit into this desert place. It finally came time to leave and the younger woman said, "I must be going now." The old lady asked, "Do you live far away?" "Oh yes," came the reply, "almost three hundred miles away." The two of them went together to the exit door, the older lady pushed in her wheel chair by the younger one. The old lady said, "This has been nice. You are so pretty. Come see me again. But, but, I don't know your name." The younger woman choked back the tears and said, "My name is Lorriane." And then for a moment there was a blinding flash of

recognition in the old lady's mind, then shame, then sorrow, then nothing. The younger woman turned and ran to her car, tears streaming down her face, feeling blessed that on that day, in the middle of one of life's deserts, a blossom had bloomed and her mother had called her "pretty."

The words of Isaiah this morning point to signs, to things that will happen, to images of a new way of being that will strengthen the faith of everyone who lives in the barren desert of life's experiences. In the midst of desert wandering, everything may seem to be futile. Yet with eyes of faith we can see blossoms of new life and become more aware that things can be changed. And when we see more blossoms, we begin to trust even more in the goodness and power of the One who makes the Promise to change the brown to green.