

“The Desert Blooms with Joy!”

Isaiah 35:1-10

Third Sunday in Advent + December 11, 2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

Do you know how much rain we receive in a typical year? According to a source on the internet, New Minden averages 43 inches of rain per year with some kind of precipitation falling 99 days per year (https://www.bestplaces.net/climate/city/illinois/new_minden). (I couldn't find a figure for Covington, IL, just Covington, Virginia, Covington, Indiana, and Covington, Kentucky!) We don't have the familiarity with the bleakness of a desert like the people of Israel did. It was the “land of milk and honey” to be sure, but it also included areas of desert, areas where the river beds ran dry for much of the year. Probably the closest thing we can imagine is the bleakness of extended periods of below-freezing temperatures—where everything appears to be a frozen tundra—or an extended period of drought such as we had here in the summer of 2012. As God prepared a book of comfort for His people to take with them before they would go into exile for seventy years, He described His coming to help His people as the reversal of desert conditions. As we take a look today, think about the joy and relief that we feel when springtime comes and things begin to green out again, or think of the relief when we are blessed with steady rains after an extended period of drought. This description shows us (1) the coming of Jesus and (2) how God works in our own lives.

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This is how the text describes the coming of the Lord to His people: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; 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” (vv.1-2). He tells the people to imagine the lushness of the areas that get plenty of rain coming upon the desert areas. He is talking about a restoration of the Creation—things becoming more like the Garden of Eden, as they were at the beginning.

And the intervention by God that brings this reversal of the curses of sin will also be felt by people: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the

ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes” (vv.5-7).

Jesus clearly knew this passage from Isaiah and another like it in Isaiah 61. In the chapters leading up to today’s Gospel reading (Matthew 11:2-11), we see that things had really been hopping in Jesus’ ministry. He had healed a man with leprosy. A centurion in Capernaum had asked Jesus to say the word and his servant would be made well. With a touch of His hand Peter’s mother-in-law was restored to her family. With His word Jesus rebuked the wind and waves. Demons were driven out of two demon-possessed men. A paralytic got up and walked when Jesus told him to. A twelve-year old girl was raised from the dead and an older woman healed from her bleeding. Two blind men received their sight and a demon was driven out of a mute man so that he could talk.

Why are these particular miracles important? Matthew related these things to us so that we could know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, that had been promised back in the days of Isaiah. Matthew’s readers can go right down the checklist and mark off the miracles one by one. These are but a few of the hundreds of prophecies from previous centuries that Christ fulfilled with great precision. John the Baptizer, sitting in His prison cell, heard about these things. John had said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). He knew that it was time for his own disciples to switch their allegiance from him to Jesus, so he told them to go to Jesus and ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3). Jesus replied with such plain words that John’s disciples would be forced to conclude that yes, Jesus is the one: “And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me”” (vv. 4-6). He went right down the checklist from Isaiah to prove that He is indeed the One for

whom God's people have been waiting, the One upon whom the whole world waits!

Jesus' central work as the Messiah involved a great reversal. Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor. He took on human flesh in a lowly fashion. The One who gave the Law lived totally under that Law. The Lord of Life became obedient unto death, even death of the cross. That was the "day of vengeance" when God gave a pay-back for all the sins of all sinners of all time. He without sin carried in His body the sins of the world. He suffered hell for us all. The Highest made Himself the lowest. The Master became the servant of all.

The Father raised Him up in glory: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:5-11).

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And now, through the working of the Holy Spirit, the desert blooms with joy in our lives! How is God working miracles for us? God does it all over the place. We are conceived and born as sinners: blind, dead, and enemies of God. But God gives us life through faith in Jesus Christ. Wherever there is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is someone who has been raised from the dead. Whoever sees the Lord Jesus for who He really is, the Son of God and the Savior of the world, has had his or her sight restored. Whoever hears the word of the Lord and takes it to heart has had his ears opened. Whoever calls on the name of the Lord in prayer and praise has had his tongue unloosened. Remember David's great psalm of repentance? He says, "Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise" (Psalm 51). We who by nature cared nothing for our neighbor are now moved to jump up and help

him in his time of need. The cool pools of the Holy Spirit are indeed flowing where the desert and parched land once prevailed! The children of wrath have become children of God.

Each day our Baptism is renewed in us. Just when we confess our sins and misery we are most ready for forgiveness. Remember the Pharisee and tax collector, the two men who went up to the temple to pray? It was the tax collector who beat His breast and said, “God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13)—he is the one who went home justified (forgiven). Jesus said: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted,” Luke 14:11.

Now you may be saying to yourself, “Where is the great reversal for which I have been praying? Where is the healing, the help, the great turn-around for me? I believe in Jesus; why hasn’t He solved all my problems?” Well, take a look at John the Baptist. He had done nothing wrong, and yet he sat there in prison. Note what Jesus does not say to him. He does not say to John’s representatives: “Tell John that I am sending Peter, James, and John tomorrow night to bust him out of that place!” That would have been a fiasco, don’t you think? Now, the Lord could have done that. In the Book of Acts we have wonderful accounts of both Peter (Acts 12) and Paul (Acts 16) being miraculously freed from prison by the intervention of the Lord. But God has not promised that kind of help to each of His children in every time and every place. At other times Paul had to sit in prison for extended periods of time. Both he and Peter were finally murdered for their faith. And remember when the apostle Paul cried out to the Lord repeatedly begging that God would remove his “thorn in the flesh”? He had some sickness or disability that, in his view, impaired his work. Christ responded, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:10). When we are weak, down, sick, in trouble--these are often the very times when God is closest to us. Psalm 34 says, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). Sometimes God decides to do the change in our heart rather than the change in our circumstances. Here, on the inside, the parched desert is replaced with the pools of living water, and faith and joy bloom instead of darkness and despair.

And we know that the best is always yet to come for the Christian. As we heard from James this morning, we are called to patience, just as the farmer waits patiently for the rain. This life will be followed by life in heaven with the Lord. What the devil means as an enemy--death--God has turned into the gateway to everlasting life for all who believe and trust in Jesus. We have been crowned with everlasting joy. Think about it. The songs of praise we sing to God are just beginning. Unending joy is already on our hearts.

Scripture says that on the Last Day the world as we know it will be destroyed by fire and God will make new heavens and a new earth: “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). That will be a new creation, one in which everything is right. All the corruption and decay that came with sin will be gone. No more lifeless deserts, no more bleak and barren waterless places, only beauty and perfection: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing” (Isaiah 35:1-2). “For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water” (Isaiah 35:6b-7a). This is the new creation which the Lord Jesus began with His miracles. Finally He will bring it to completion. Best of all, our bodies will be changed to be like His glorious body. That will be the greatest reversal of all.

The desert will bloom with joy! Christ has already demonstrated it to show that He is the promised Savior. It is the way God works in us now and a how He will transform things on the Last Day.