

Traveling the Highway; Flowers in the Desert

Meditation on Isaiah 35

Dec. 11, 2016

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus or lily 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. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 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.' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 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; 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. 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 traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. 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. 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.

I was blessed to visit with my brother this week. Steve, who is only 18 months older than me, lives in Kansas. He came to stay a few days with my parents in Orange City. I wasn't feeling my best on Thursday afternoon when he and my parents came for lunch at my home, but I was happy to see him! We only see each other about once or twice a year. But when we are together, I am reminded of God's faithfulness and how God cares about broken relationships, especially in our families. Do you have any broken

relationships in your family?

For many years, beginning when we were children, my brother and I did not get along. The hurt we inflicted on each other went deep. Every moment we spend together now--talking and laughing and listening to one another--- is a reminder to me of how the Lord longs to heal all our hurts-- our physical and emotional wounds. Our loving God shows that he cares about our relationships through the sending of His Son to live among us, and be one of us, and draw us back to Him. Christ's death and resurrection healed what was broken between God and human beings **and** human beings with each other-- relationships destroyed by sin. Colossians 1:19-20 says, "For in him (Jesus) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

God's work of reconciliation is both accomplished and not yet complete; the Kingdom of God hasn't yet come to fruition. God wants to use us right now for His healing, reconciling work. In 2 Cor. 5:17-19, Paul tells us, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

So, on this Third Sunday in Advent, we remember our calling to keep on walking together this journey of faith, looking for God's loving presence in our lives every day. We seek to bring others the hope of Christ's salvation, to reveal to the world the vision of the Kingdom-- the dawning of a new age.

Rejoice, praise the Lord, and live in peace! For we are God's ransomed and redeemed. Let us prepare our hearts for the coming King of Kings.

Our reading in Isaiah, spoken by a prophet living hundreds of years before Christ's humble birth, reveals a vision of the Kingdom when the Lord returns to save His people, journeying back to Zion--a Jerusalem that has been made new. With talk of the wilderness, springs of water and streams in the desert, and the journey made on foot by people with "weak hands," "feeble knees" and "fearful hearts," we are transported back to Moses leading the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt. Isaiah doesn't mean for his audience to look back for there was very little joy and singing of God's praises on that ancient journey--just plenty of grumbling and complaining. He means to propel his audience into Israel's bright future, when the war-ravaged land is blooming with beautiful flowers--symbols of hope and blessing and the Creation restored and renewed. The people of God will be visited by the One who is to come, the One who will *save* them and bring the exiles, the deportees, home. They will see the "glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God." They will have no more enemies to hurt them. Not even a lion or other "ravenous beast" will meet them on the highway (an ancient paved road) back to God. And no traveler --not even a foolish one-- on this journey shall go astray. For salvation is not from us; it is from the God who will keep those who seek Him, those he has "ransomed" and "redeemed," walking in His will.

Isaiah writes during a time of suffering and upheaval, chaos and confusion, when the people of God are told in the previous chapter (34:2) that God is "enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their

hordes; he has doomed them; has given them over for slaughter.” We read of a land soaked with blood and smelling of death. While some parts of Isaiah may have been written during the Babylonian Captivity in the 6th century BCE, the first part of Isaiah was probably written in the 8th century BCE, when Assyria was expanding westward from its origins in modern-day northern Iraq towards the Mediterranean, destroying first Aram (in what is modern Syria) in 734–732 BCE, then the Kingdom of Israel in 722–721, and finally Judah in 701 BCE.

But Christians in the 21st century and going as far back as the Early Church can’t help but see Jesus in this passage and so many others in this Old Testament book sometimes called the “Fifth Gospel.” With the mention of water in the wilderness, the Early Church saw John baptizing in the Jordan, just as they saw the bloom of the crocus or lily as symbolizing the purity that comes about by the Holy Spirit in baptism. When John cries out, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” Matthew quotes from Isaiah 40:3, “For this is the one spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” When Jesus’ birth is announced, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” Matthew is quoting Isaiah 7:14. Jesus himself quotes from Isaiah 61 when he preaches his first sermon, saying in Luke 4:21, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” In today’s gospel reading in Matthew 11:2-6, Jesus is asked by John the Baptist’s disciples, “Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?” He responds by citing verses from Isaiah 29, 61, and today’s passage-- 35--when he says, “Go and tell John what you hear and 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 brought to them.” John in Revelation also borrows language and images from Isaiah 35 when he shares his vision of eternity in the heavenly places, when the redeemed see the Lord face to face. In Rev. 21:3-5, a loud voice proclaims, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away. And the One seated on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”

On Friday night, during our Advent Study, “The Uncluttered Heart,” meeting at Bob and Sandy Hill’s, we were asked where we saw or experienced God with us last week. When did we feel hope and peace? And I thought about my visit with my brother on a day when I wasn’t feeling well. That was definitely the Lord showing me his faithfulness and encouraging me to keep on following Him, to stay on the Holy Way, all the while, rejoicing and singing God’s praises. The faint scars on my brother’s face reminded me of the horrible motorcycle accident a few years ago that brought me to realize that I needed to change my heart and just love and forgive him. I drove the 9 hours from Renville, Minnesota, to visit him in a hospital in Topeka, KS, and when I walked into the ICU, I hardly recognized him because of the swelling and discoloration of his face. He had broken bones and a pierced lung, but his breathing tube had just been removed. He managed to smile brightly when he saw me, though I am sure he was in pain.

His words were like flowers in a desert, a spring of water in a dry, thirsty place along my journey of faith.

“Hello, sister,” he said. “I’m glad you came.”

Friends, in the season of Advent, we travel together on the same road, walking the same Holy Way, drawing nearer to God and one another. We listen for God’s voice and cling to His promises in the wildernesses of our lives. Let us look for our Emmanuel--our God with us-- now as we wait and long for Christ’s return for His Church. Let us encourage one another when we go through trials and suffering, with words that are like flowers in the desert, springs of water in dry places. Does your life reveal the hope of God’s salvation? The dawning of a new age? Do you have broken relationships? Ask the Lord to help you take the path to reconciliation--and be made whole. You are God’s ransomed and redeemed! Rejoice, praise the Lord and live in peace! Prepare your hearts for the coming King of Kings!

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for being our God with us, our Emmanuel, and your Spirit that fills and empowers your Church to seek you and do your will. Lord, stir us to eagerly join you in your ministry of reconciliation, remembering your mercy for us and that we are saved not by anything that we do or have accomplished, but solely by your grace. Thank you for the hope that we have in your Son, our Savior and Redeemer--that we are new creations in Him--and for the promise of eternal life with You in the heavenly places, where there is no sorrow or sighing, for the former things have passed away. Lead us to walk in your ways of peace and love. Grant us your joy to share with one another and with the world. In Christ we pray.
Amen.