

“The Road to Salvation”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent III – December 15, 2019

Isaiah 35: 1-10

So, I’m going to start my message today by sharing that today is my mom’s birthday. She turns 78-years-old today, and I’ll probably get in trouble for saying that, but oh well! While we can’t be with her in person today to celebrate, we are looking forward to her being here over Christmas and we can honor her then. For any of you who have birthdays in the month of December, and especially close to Christmas, then you know how my mother has felt during her lifetime. It’s as if the two get wrapped into one (sorry for the pun), and it can be hard to feel like your birthday is special in relation to Christmas. And her traditional birthday cake reflects that: as a child, she always had a Christmas Tree cake for her birthday, and she still has the baking pans. I’ll ask her to bring those with her next week – I think her granddaughters might work on that for her!

My mom’s birthday will also now always be different – for her and for us. Two years ago, my father died one week after her birthday. That year was hard, to say the least. I was in West Virginia, Dad had just had a back procedure to try and alleviate the pain he was having, and Mom was being the full-time caregiver for him. For someone who always remembered and treated my mom on her birthday, it was so strange to see Dad not even be able to acknowledge it was her birthday. Time helps to a degree with these anniversaries and how grief is intertwined in them. But there’s no denying that because life happens, how we mark these occasions can change from year to year.

Two years ago, I went out to the store and got my mom a Christmas cactus for her birthday. She loves plants and flowers, and I’ve always enjoyed Christmas cacti at this time of the year. I sent her another one last week ahead of her birthday. She’s probably tired of them by now, or she is wondering if I know of any other plants that would make a good gift! But for me, I guess, there’s a deeper meaning in that plant now. There is the memory of two years ago, when amid all the heaviness and uncertainty we still sought to find joy. And there is the fact that for a plant that is just green for almost the entire year, for a few weeks every December, these beautiful red blooms arrive, transforming it with color. It’s my reminder that in the barren times of life, God can still spring forth joy, providing us hope when it seems there is no hope left.

Every time I read Isaiah 35, I cannot help but think of the Christmas cactus. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly” (35:1-2).

A cactus blossoming. The burning desert becoming a pool of water. The blind seeing. The lame leaping like a deer. Joy in the midst of barrenness and hopelessness.

This passage from Isaiah is full of oxymorons, phrases that seem to contradict each other. But in many respects, that is the Season of Advent: believing and trusting in God's promise of joy in the midst of darkness and despair.

Isaiah is speaking to a people who are full of hopelessness. They have been taken away from their homeland, the center of their worship – the temple in Jerusalem – has been destroyed, and they hardly have a reason to believe that God is still with them. They would have likely experienced hardship and despair as they were taken away on a desert road to Babylon, not unlike the experience of Native Americans in our country on the Trail of Tears. The lens through which the Israelites viewed the world would have made things seem barren, isolating, and threatening.

The prophet takes that lens and refocuses his people's vision toward hope and joy. The people's wilderness will be full of joy and singing; they will once again experience the majesty and splendor of their homeland like Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon (35:2). The blind will see all of God's splendor, the deaf will hear all of God's joy, the lame will dance in all of God's majesty, the mute will sing of God's glory (35:5-6). Creation will be transformed by God's might and power, turning the desert into a place of life, and keeping all those who threaten God's people – the jackals, lions and ravenous beasts – far, far away (35:7,9).

And the road of exile will now be a highway back to God, a Holy Way for the redeemed. It will be a road filled with dancing and joy, not tears and pain. It will be for God's people, and no one – not even fools – will wander or get lost (35:8). For it will be on this highway that God's people will return to Zion, obtaining joy and gladness, with sorrow and sighing fleeing away (35:10).

Rev. Anne Sutherland Howard writes: *Isaiah's poetry gives the Israelites the images of hope. The crocus shall bloom again, the desert blossom, the desolation shall become glad singing. And then he changes the tense of his verbs. He moves from the desert shall rejoice, the crocus shall bloom, to present tense imperatives: Strengthen. Make firm. He reminds them of the vision of God's glory, and then he says, "do it." Strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees, speak bold words of comfort and courage that say God is here in our midst right now. Do not fear.*

The prophet roots them in the land, giving them a sense of place and promise. Isaiah tells them to look to the world around them for the signs of the presence of God.

We find the crocuses, the signs of hope, it would seem, where we least expect: under icy snow, when the world is cold, in the bleak desert,

when we are tapped out, worn out, discouraged. When we are trapped like John, in Herod's prison, where there is no reason, no good reason for anything like hope, when we are devoid of delight and way beyond surprise

www.day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037db/anne_howard_wheres_your_crocus_isaiah_35

Last month, I spent three days at Pyoca Camp and Retreat Center in southern Indiana. It was a chance for me to take some time for myself in spiritual retreat, to do some reading and worship planning, and to seek renewal ahead of this busy Advent and Christmas season. The weather wasn't great – typical November in Indiana. But I did get out one morning before it rained and hiked around the lake and grounds, and I enjoyed one of my favorite spiritual practices – photography. I find that when I look at my surroundings through the lens of a camera, I see things with more depth and meaning than I do with just my own set of eyes.

As I walked around the lake, I found myself drawn to different images of pathways. Some were made by humans, so that it was easy to traverse difficult terrain. Others were natural or cut through the woods by years of foot or vehicle traffic. And still others offered a choice as to which way to follow – a literal fork-in-the-road. What was also telling as I walked these various paths were the signs of life I saw along the way. Amid the barrenness of late-autumn, there was still evidence that life was present.

The paths we find ourselves on can lead us in many different directions. They can take us to places of self-indulgence and pleasure, where there is little thought of the well-being of others. They can take us to places of anxiety and stress, where there is no longer the capacity to differentiate ourselves from others. They can take us to places of hopelessness and loneliness, where there is only darkness and a disconnect from the world.

Or the roads we travel can take us to the source of our lives, to the One who has created us, redeemed us, and sustains us. That is the path of God's people, and it is a path that is full of joy and gladness, where sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

What path are you on in this Advent Season? What wildernesses are you wandering in, feeling hopeless and barren? How are you being led to God's Holy Way, and what signs are in your midst, reminding you that God's comfort and courage will strengthen your weak hands and make firm your feeble knees, to journey on the road to salvation? What are you doing to make God's vision a reality?

I am aware of those in our church who are facing unemployment, and there is great uncertainty about their financial security for them and their family. But what gives me hope and is a sign of God's joy is their faithfulness in taking the next step and believing that God will be with them – Emmanuel will be with them – on their journey ahead.

I am aware of many in our congregation who are like my mom was two years ago – serving as full-time caregivers for spouses or parents or friends. It is draining and exhausting, to say the least, and they can feel cut-off from all the holiday celebrations others are having, because of their sense of responsibility to their loved one. But what gives me hope and is a sign of God's joy is when a friend or a neighbor offers to help or offers a listening ear, and they are renewed in their faith because of God's strength and courage for the journey ahead.

Our church has experienced eight deaths in 2019, three of whom were charter members, several of whom were beloved husbands, wives, parents, grandparents, and saints. Many of us have suffered other losses in our lives – either this year or in years past – which have impacted us in significant ways. Still others of us are feeling lost, feeling overwhelmed, feeling anxious, and resent and struggle with the world's happy holiday spirit which seems shallow and false amid our grief and struggle.

That is why as a church we will give space for us to gather in worship to acknowledge this reality, lifting our whole selves up to God in prayer. Our Blue Christmas Service this Tuesday at 6:30pm is our way of taking action to hear words of comfort and strength, and to remind ourselves that God's joy does come – even in our times of barrenness and wilderness – so we might continue the journey before us. As the familiar Christmas carol says:

*And you, beneath life's crushing load,
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow,
look now, for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing:
O, rest beside the weary road,
and hear the angels sing.*

("It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," Edmund Hamilton Sears, © 1849, Glory to God, PCUSA Hymnal, #123).

As you travel your Advent journey this year, may you be able to hear the angels sing God's joy to you, so you might be strengthened and uplifted for the road ahead.

Thanks be to God. Amen.