

A Desert in Bloom

Part 3 of Sermon Series:
A Geography of Salvation

a sermon based on

Isaiah 35:1-10 – James 5:7-10

and delivered on
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“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.” (Isa. 35:1-2a) A desert will bloom. I don’t know about all of you, but when I think of a desert, I think of a barren – almost hopeless – place. For some reason, I go to the extreme and think about the Sahara – sand dunes and more sand. The Mojave and the Gobi, however, have life, just not a lot.

In the passage we have from Isaiah, today, the prophet speaks to a promise. Even though the people are desperate – their homeland has been invaded – godlessness and injustice abound, in time their despair in the midst of God’s seeming absence will find relief.

We as Christians have been confronted with that same spiritual desert, almost since the beginning. As we await the joyful celebration remembering Christ’s birth, we also await his return. Through his earthly ministry of healing and teaching, he established a deeper understanding of God’s love. Through his death on the cross, he demonstrated just how full of grace God is – willing to die so that we can set aside our sin and live. Through his resurrection, he established hope for eternal life. But he also promised that he would return to establish God’s kingdom and our salvation.

That was nearly two thousand years ago, and we’re still waiting. How long must we be patient? Is it unreasonable for us to wonder? Think about it. James the apostle wrote “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.” (Jas 5:7a) That wasn’t two thousand years later but within decades. It’s challenging because patience is hard.

We get impatient waiting for computers to boot, or cell phones to turn on. Technologically, it’s nothing new. I remember (back when they had vacuum tubes) waiting for televisions and radios to “warm up.” I don’t like waiting. I still don’t know why the doctor’s office refers to me as a “patient.” That’s not one of my virtues.

“Be patient,” James says; but what he doesn’t say is to be passive. Being patient doesn’t mean that we have to sit still. Immediately after calling the church to patience, he says “The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.” (Jas 5:7b) Before the farmer waits, he tills – he sows – he fertilizes. Right?

But farmers don’t usually plant in a desert. Do they? And yet when the rain falls in the desert, plants spring forth from the ground almost immediately. Woody, dead shrubs spring to life full of foliage and flowers. Toads pop up out of the ground. Desolation gives way to life. What farmer, planted? None. But someone prepared the desert for life. That would be the Lord. Right?

Isaiah isn’t as direct as James in telling the people to be patient; but that’s essentially what he’s saying. He’s saying God has got everything in place ready so that even the desert will bloom and yield not a path or a foot trail – but a highway to salvation. Highways have the capacity to move a lot more people. In our urgency for the rain that brings life to the desert – and for the reign of God’s promise when Jesus returns, we might forget (if we ever considered it in the first place) that God’s promise of salvation isn’t just for us. He so loved the *world* that he sent his son. (Jn 3:16) That’s the dilemma, isn’t it?

I want Jesus to come back. I also want to be ready; not just me but the world. In the modern church we talk about discipleship, serving others as the means to be ready. It’s a good thing to serve others, there are lots of service clubs and social service organizations dedicated to that purpose. Discipleship is more than that. Disciples till and plant and fertilize not merely to sustain what is, but to cultivate abundance so that when the rain does come, the highway – the Holy Way – of salvation will be full of people claiming God’s promise.

More than that – as disciples – I think we have a role in bringing about the rain that leads the desert to blossom. Let’s go back to that first line we heard from Isaiah, this morning, but just a little farther, “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.” (Isa. 35:1-2a)

In the beginning, in Genesis 1, when all that existed was chaos, we hear that God spoke. Right? And yet that entire story of creation is a song. It's as if God didn't just speak, but that he sang the world and the universe into existence. "Hark! the herald angels SING," announcing the incarnation that is Jesus' birth. Right? Singing – whether we sing well or not (Psalm 100 says to make a joyful noise) transforms our joy and our desperation into worship. I'm convinced that worship brings the rain. Not just into our lives, but into everything around us. Maybe it's not the torrential downpour that will blossom and entire desert, but it helps to restore our own hope and it spreads into the lives we influence: if we claim it and if we let it.

There is a church in western Virginia right next door to a prison. There's worship in both buildings every Sunday. In the church, the singing is half-hearted and dull. The singing in the prison is vibrant and joyful. People often ask the preacher how he explains the difference. He comments that through Jesus Christ God has acted in the lives of those prisoners. That fills them with joy. In the church, people are too busy, too self-involved, too self-conscious. Do they really feel the need for God? We complain when it rains. Those in the desert rejoice. As Stephen Crotts says, "If you don't have to praise God, then you haven't met him yet!"¹

We as Christians are one of the few religions that have a hymnal: us and Judaism and a few other minor religions. Yet it seems as if we've forgotten the power that comes in praising God. Churches are filled with half-hearted sing. Even in some of the larger churches with a stage and light show supporting the praise band, I've looked around and seen lots of people with hands raised and faces looking up with eyes AND LIPS closed. Amplifiers in one and organ pipes in another provide volume rather than the people of God.

In my darkest times, in those moments when I found myself wandering the desert worship – singing – just a sprinkling a grace sustained me and restored hope.

As we look towards Christmas – as we look towards Christ's return – we have the opportunity take on an active role in his return – not in impatience but in anticipation. We can claim that when we allow ourselves to worship – to sing God's praises. When we as Christians reclaim that opportunity to give ourselves in praise rather than to be sung to or sung for, the rain will fall. Blossoms of hope and promise will appear in our own lives, and it will infiltrate the world around us as we look toward that day when we walk on the Holy Way – that highway of salvation surrounded by a multitude of those whom Jesus loves. AMEN.

¹ Stephen M. Crotts, *Long Time Coming! First Lesson Sermons for Advent/Christmas/Epiphany, Cycle A* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Pub. Co, 2001)23-24.