

Desert Blooms

Rev. John Allen

We have been hearing a lot from Isaiah in this Advent season. It wasn't really anything we planned to be honest.

Francesco picked some words from Isaiah for his sermon on the first Sunday of Advent. That Sunday—just after Thanksgiving—we heard Isaiah's words: Comfort, Comfort, my people,

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;

And last Sunday, Jane chose another one of Isaiah's visions to accompany the beautifully done cantata: "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light..."

So—not to be left out—this week I bring you yet another of the prophet's visions: "the desert will be glad, the wilderness will rejoice and blossom..."

This is how we tend to read scripture here at church. A bit at a time, relatively short passages, pulled out and examined. One by one. You know the drill.

And if you have been listening carefully to the selections from Isaiah that you have heard for these past several weeks, you might be left with the distinct impression that Isaiah is pretty pie-in-the-sky, a card carrying member of the glass-half-full society of optimists and dreamers.

So just to give Isaiah a full hearing.

And to set the record straight.

I want to offer one more passage, one more of Isaiah's visions, it comes just before the reading that Wanda just read for us.

This is another one of Isaiah's visions. Buckle up.

And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch,
and her soil into sulfur;
her land shall become burning pitch.

Night and day it shall not be quenched;
its smoke shall go up forever.
From generation to generation it shall lie waste;

no one shall pass through it forever and ever.
But the hawk and the hedgehog shall possess it;
the owl and the raven shall live in it.
He shall stretch the line of confusion over it,
and the plummet of chaos over its nobles.
They shall name it No Kingdom There,
and all its princes shall be nothing.
Thorns shall grow over its strongholds,
nettles and thistles in its fortresses.
It shall be the haunt of jackals.
an abode for ostriches.

Yikes.

Now, I don't really know why Isaiah was so down on hedgehogs and ostriches. But you get the picture he is painting here. Not good.

As much as the prophet has beautiful imagination of the world that may come into being. He also has a very realistic view of the world as it is. And the very real possibility that things could go, well, quite badly.

If heaven on Earth is God's dream. It seems that hell on earth is still very much within the realm of possibility.

Which makes the sudden transition to today's text all that more jarring.

There is no transition. No explanation. We just jump right from the rivers of burning pitch and the jackels. To this:

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom”

Put simply. Today's reading. About the blooming dessert and the paradise on Earth. It doesn't belong here.

It doesn't fit.

It has actually puzzled readers for thousands of years. Why does the text do this weird thing.

Its like someone taped over the original story with something else entirely, and it just crashes in, smash cut.

Speaking of cuts. This is where I cut out of this sermon about 20 minutes of extremely arcane Biblical scholarship. You're welcome.

The long and short of it is that scholars of the bible have affirmed the oddness people have long felt.

These verses don't belong here. In plenty of old manuscripts, they are not here. They come much later on.

It is a good reminder that this book did not just get handed down from heaven in its form. God's inspiration of this text has always occurred through the hands and hearts of human authors and editors. And somewhere along the line one of those editors, compiling the text, made a choice, to cut and paste. To move these verses here.

One of my seminary professors' Barbara Lundblad wondered once if perhaps the Spirit of God whispered in his ear and said, "put it here...before anyone is ready."

And so here it is, Dr. Lundblad writes. "a word that couldn't wait until it might make more sense."

"A word that couldn't wait until it might make more sense."

A surprising image of hope amidst a landscape of despair, like, a blooming crocus in a parched dessert.

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Most of the heroes of our history are those who have dared to speak a word that couldn't wait until it would make more sense. As if the Holy Spirit whispered in their ears, "say it now...before anyone is ready."

I think of Sojourner Truth, at the end of one of her antislavery talks some approached her and said, "Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Do you suppose people care what you say? Why, I don't care any more for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea."

"Perhaps not," she answered, "but, the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching."

Or Martin Luther King Jr. in his letter from a Birmingham Jail who called out those white clergymen who had told him to be patient and to refrain from disruptive demonstrations:

"Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard

the word 'Wait!' It rings in our ears with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

Or the rising voices of youth, a generation for whom ecological disaster is no abstract scientific theory, but a threat to the planet we all need to survive, who cry out in discomfoting tones and bold actions to shake us from complacent stupor.

Or the black youth of Ferguson and other communities around the country who raised their voices and their arms to pierce the conscience of a nation that had grown too accustomed to disregarding the inherent value of their lives.

A word out of place. Before people are ready to hear it. That is how God moves the world toward these dreams and imaginations of justice, love, and peace.

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In a world torn by war. In a nation strained by enmity. With hearts carrying heavy griefs, and potent fears, it could easily feel like the beauty and joy of this season feels out of place.

It could start to feel naive, or sentimental, to celebrate as we do. To keep talking about peace and love in a moment when they feel so far off. To say with a straight face that we envision a world without weapons or warfare.

But it is our role as faithful people to reach forward into this visionary future of God's kingdom come. That future of blooming deserts, of Lions and lambs lying down together. A little child leading God's people. Swords bent into plows. And nations that forget all they know of war.

It is the work of faithful hearts to reach into a future where refugees are welcomed with open hearts, the prisons are empty and the schools full. A future when all people are free and flourishing.

It is our job to reach into that future and bring back a word or an image that this world is not yet ready for.

And stick it, right in here, right the middle of all the despair and anguish. Where it doesn't belong. Like a flower in the desert.

It is a testimony to the world we imagine. It is our way of staking a claim for God in the world. Or helping a tender new shoot sprout from the stumps of our broken dreams.

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And that is what we are going to be celebrating in here next week.

That in a world that needed a might and strength to overcome the evil of the world, God sent a newborn baby who couldn't even hold his own head up.

In a world that needed a king, God entered our world not in the halls of a palace, but in the feeding trough of a barn, born to the poor, in an insignificant corner of a mighty empire.

In a world where the strong were in charge, God sent one who said that the meek would inherit the earth.

In a world where the poor and children were pushed to the side, God sent one who held them in his arms.

God did it then. And God does it still.

Amidst jackals and hedgehogs. Thorns and burning rivers. Smoke and waste. Chaos and confusion.

A word that simply would not wait until it might make more sense.

Whispered in a barn.

Put it here.

Say it now.