

"A Highway in the Desert"

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Scripture – selections from Isaiah 35 – New Revised Standard Version

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.
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."
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
A highway shall be there
and it shall be called the Holy Way.
It shall be for God's people.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Sermon - Sometimes I think the Advent season is a bit like the sounds of an orchestra. There are low sounds and high sounds, mellow sounds and dissonant sounds – loud and soft, fast and slow - and then sometimes all these sounds, all these instruments in the orchestra, come together in an aching moment of such beauty and wonder that I am transported to another place.

An orchestra tunes up to one note, usually played on the oboe, and everyone else tunes their instruments to that note. Barbara Lundblad said, in a course on preaching that she taught at Kirkridge Retreat Center, that the book of Isaiah is like the oboe in the orchestra of Advent; the book of Isaiah sounds the note to which we tune our Advent journey. Written over the span of 500 years, by a poet and prophet named Isaiah and by several generations of poets who followed him, written in the midst of terrible times of war and exile, Isaiah gives us both the harsh dissonant sounds of the realities of life and the soaring sounds of poetry and metaphor filled with hope and with vision.

Isaiah writes of a people who have lived for many generations under a long list of failed systems and regimes. The poor and needy are oppressed; the rich grow lazy and powerful; the trappings of religion and worship overshadow justice and mercy. Do we not know of such a time ourselves? Isaiah's country is threatened by a succession of powerful enemies, and eventually conquered and its holy Temple in Jerusalem destroyed. Then its brightest and best are carried away to Babylon as exiles.

And in the midst of all this, Isaiah and those who followed after him give us this symphony of God's transforming power in an explosion of beautiful images: blossoming

flowers in the desert, the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, tired hands and weak knees healed, sorrow and sighing fleeing away.

My friends, Isaiah's words are the word for us this day; Isaiah's words are the word for us this Advent season. Isaiah affirms that it is precisely in the desert, in the wilderness, in those places of arid loss where it seems that nothing could possibly grow, it is precisely there that God's way is to be found. Every morning as I read the newspaper and listen to NPR or CNN news, it is at then that I need to pick up my copy of the Advent booklet and read Maya Angelou's words, "Into our world of fear comes this glad season, as hope is born again in the faces of our children and rides on the shoulders of our aged, brightening all things."

Isaiah assures me, that for all my fear and my shattered hopes, for all my tired hands and weak knees, for all my unease about the changes in my life, a high way – a road – shall be there. As I read this passage earlier this week, those words were like someone grabbing me by the shoulder to get my attention. "A highway shall be there." Not might be there, not could be there, but shall be there, even and especially in the midst of the desert. And that high way, says Isaiah, shall be called the Holy way, the place where dreams of justice and love and blessings flow like a river. These visions of a time when water springs from the thirsty ground – and swords are beaten into plowshares – and the lion shall lie down with the lamb – these are not descriptions to be debated but they are instead an unquenchable dream of God's kingdom that does not die and that continually calls me to unceasing persistence and faithfulness and hope.

So I sound the oboe for us this morning, the tuning fork of faith for this Advent season. I call us to open our eyes and our ears, to open our hearts and our souls, to the note Isaiah sounds of flowers blooming in the desert places of our lives, of springs of water irrigating the wilderness moments of our days, of promises of coming home. And I call us especially to the gift of wonder.

Receive that gift of wonder today. Receive it as you listen to the ancient story of new birth, as Jesus' followers told it in another time of great darkness. Receive this gift of wonder in the image of God's love blossoming in the desert of a lowly stable, with poor and oppressed people, opening up a highway of grace. Receive this gift of wonder as you see the good news of this story reflected on the faces our children, who share with us the beauty and laughter and dreams of their world. And then let us go forth, with that sense of wonder and mystery, carrying with us Isaiah's song for Advent, "*Do not fear! A high way shall be there.*"

Prayer -

Advent is upon us, and I am here, O God,
praying for strength and healing
to transform those places where I am weak and tired,
praying for courage and faith
to transform those places where I am afraid and alone,
praying for peace and love
to transform those places where discord and hatred seem rampant,
praying for the gift of wonder
to transform what is ordinary
into the mystery and hope of all the extra-ordinary
within and around and among me
so that I too may hear the angels sing. Amen.

Benediction:

May this Advent season bring you gifts of the Spirit:
patience and courage
insight and wisdom
a sense of wonder and mystery,
and a light that the darkness can not dim.