**Watering the Garden of Hope**

**Text: Isaiah 35:1-2**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**December 15, 2019**

When I was a boy, we had a small cactus garden. It sat on the windowsill in our dining room. Even a cactus garden needs to be watered occasionally, so once in a while Dad would come into the room with a spray bottle and he’d say, “I’m going to make it rain in the desert.”

Among the cacti in that garden was a Christmas cactus. One day I asked why it’s called a Christmas cactus, and my big brother said, “Well duh; it’s because it blooms at Christmas, you moran!” By that standard, ours was actually a Thanksgiving cactus; but whether we’re talking November, December or even January, it’s quite remarkable for something to bloom on a cold and gray Chicago day, in the middle of a mini-desert!

The desert shall bloom! The prophet has something to say about that. The opening verses of Isaiah 35 put it this way:

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.

There’s a lot of desert between Babylon and Jerusalem. It’s the desert that Abraham traversed when God sent him in search of the unknown land that would someday be given to his descendants. It’s the desert that the Wise Men crossed as they followed a star to Bethlehem. And it’s the desert through which the exiles were about to pass on their way home from captivity; on their way home to Jerusalem.

But the desert didn’t look like it was blooming; not to the untrained eyes of the exiles. But the prophet saw the desert bloom with the eyes of faith. With hope born of that vision, he shared the good news with those who were about to make the long journey. “The desert shall bloom! Streams of water shall flow!! A highway will appear!!! We’re going home.”

Let’s back up for a moment and consider the context of this passage. As I noted last week, the Book of Isaiah contains the wisdom of more than one prophet. Much of the material in chapters 1-39 is the work of the 8th century B.C. prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem. The material in chapters 40-55 is the work of a 6th century B.C. prophet whom biblical scholars call Second Isaiah. But tucked into Isaiah’s first 39 chapters are a few gems from 2nd Isaiah; and these 10 verses of chapter 35 are almost definitely among them. An abundance of thoughts and words and phrases that are characteristic of 2nd Isaiah are found here in Isaiah 35; that’s why many scholars give these verses a 6th century BC setting.

This is important because context is important. What I mean by a word or phrase may be different from what you mean; it depends on our context and experience. When I think of football, I’m thinking of the Chicago Bears. I’m thinking of their tradition of tough defense and running the ball. That’s what I mean when I say football. When you say football, maybe you’re thinking of the high-octane passing game of Peyton Manning and the Indianapolis Colts. You see, the meanings of our words – any words – are influenced by our situation and our experience. So if you want to know the meaning of a document – any document, including the many books of the Bible – you have to consider the context in which the words of that document were written or spoken. You have to make some educated guesses about when the author lived and what he or she experienced and what he or she intended to communicate.

To be clear, in the Bible we hear God’s Word. But that Word comes to us through very human words: written and spoken in a wide variety of historical and cultural settings. If we want to understand the words, we need to know something about the context. And then we can hear more clearly – through these human words – the Word of God.

So the context, once again, is the exiles from Jerusalem held captive in Babylon. They are deep in despair. They need a word of hope. Context matters. First Isaiah addresses folks who are deep in sin and need to be confronted. When you’re comfortable in a land that is foisting injustice upon the widow and the refugee, you need to be afflicted with challenging words. Hence the words of judgment that we hear from First Isaiah. When you’re already afflicted by despair; when you look into the future and all you can see is something like a dark and barren desert, then you need to be comforted by words of hope. That’s the setting of Second Isaiah, and his amazing vision of a desert transformed into a luscious garden.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.” Which, of course, seems crazy to you and me; but then, we’re not prophets. We look at a desert, we see a desert. A prophet looks at a desert and he sees a garden. Because a prophet, a visionary, sees things that are not yet there. That’s the first thing that I want you to remember this week. The Great Plains were once known as the Great American Desert. Now they are the breadbasket of America. When the pioneers first crossed the Missouri River, all they saw with their eyes were miles upon miles of arid grassland, stretching all the way to the horizon. But with the eyes of their hearts, they saw acre upon acre of rich farm land.

A prophet can see things that aren’t yet there. That’s what hope is. It’s the bird singing to the dawn when it’s still dark. Or Mary, in another era of despair, with Rome now the oppressor of God’s people; Mary envisioning that the baby growing within her would remove the tyrants from their thrones and lift-up the lowly; he’d fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty (see Luke 1:46-55). Quite a daunting task for a tiny baby not yet born. But a prophet can see things that aren’t yet there. And women too are prophets.

A prophet sees things that aren’t yet there, like a desert transformed into a garden. And a prophetic people are those who act as if those things are possible, and then they make it so. The pioneers on the Great Plains knew that they couldn’t *wish* the Great American Desert into farmland. They had to hitch horse to plough and break the prairie sod. They had to endure years of drought and keep at it. They had to dam rivers and tap aquifers in order to irrigate the land. Which is why the descendants of those pioneers – most of them conservatives to the core – are so opposed to building the Keystone XL pipeline and the risk that it poses to those same aquifers should it leak; the risk that it poses to the springs of water that have made the desert bloom.

A prophetic people can both envision the seemingly impossible and do the hard work to make it so because they are wired for hope. Indeed, all humans are wired for hope. That’s part of what it means to be created in the image of God. We humans are wired for hope. The God of hope has made us that way. That’s why we keep going, even when there’s no clear way ahead. That’s why a mother will go to incredible lengths to protect and make life better for her children. That’s why Hoosiers are organizing to protect the Healthy Indiana Plan – the largely state-financed health insurance plan for folks who can’t otherwise afford health insurance – that’s why Hoosiers are organizing to protect this good, home-grown, Republican-conceived plan when the very government that created it is now trying to sabotage it. We humans are wired for hope, and when we find ourselves in dire straits, we’ll go to great lengths to accomplish the seemingly impossible.

We humans are wired for hope. That’s why those exiles headed out across a desert that was not yet a garden, in order to rebuild Jerusalem. That’s why, as they engaged in that difficult work, they waited and hoped for a Messiah who never seemed to come; but they kept hoping anyway. That’s why a young woman – without a husband, with no guarantee of family support – said “Yes” to an angel, and conceived and bore a Son, who was – and is – Emmanuel: God with us.

A prophet sees things that aren’t yet there, seemingly impossible things; and a prophetic people act as if such things *are* possible, and they work hard to make it so. Indeed, sometimes a prophetic people will live as if these things are *already* so. They will live as if the desert is already blooming.

Much of France was just as desolate as a desert during the dark days of World War I. Divided between entrenched armies, with a swath of lifeless ground stretching all the way from the English Channel to the Alps, a good chunk of France was the muddy morass of No Man’s Land.

It was Christmas Eve, 1914. And if you’ve heard this story before it’s okay, because it’s a story that ought to be told every Christmas, along with the Grinch and Scrooge and Charlie Brown!

It was Christmas Eve, 1914. The war that had begun 6 months earlier with the promise that the troops would be home by Christmas showed no signs of abating. Indeed, it would rage for 4 more years.

Christmas Eve; and the sentries along both the British and German lines were looking out at that muddy desert of No Man’s Land. The men in both trenches were playing cards, and talking quietly, and thinking of home.

Suddenly the stillness of the night was broken by…singing.

Stille nacht, heilige nacht,

Alles schlaft, einsam wacht

“Blimy,” the British troops said to each other, “the Germans are singing to us.” So the Brits responded:

Round yon virgin, mother and child,

Holy infant so tender and mild.

And then in two languages the armies sang with one voice:

Schlaf in himmlischer ruh

Sleep in heavenly peace.

Back and forth they serenaded each other: *O Tannenbaum* from one side, *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* from the other.

Then the British sentries saw something moving across No Man’s Land. They fixed their sights on what they thought was an attack, but as their eyes focused they could see a white flag, blazing like a Christmas star across that dark waste of a muddy desert. One brave British soldier climbed over the top to greet his adversary amidst the mud. And then more men, from both sides, made their way into No Man’s Land. There they greeted each other and shook hands.

“Happy Christmas, old chap.”

“Froliche Weinachten, meiner Freund.”

They exchanged chocolates and cigarettes. Showed each other pictures of wives and sweethearts. Toasted each other with slim rations of schnapps and rum. There were even soccer games – football, as they called it – in the muddy desert that had been transformed into a playground. No doubt more than one soldier thought of Isaiah’s names for the One born that night: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

Perhaps this impromptu truce ran all the way through Christmas Day and into Christmas Night. But too soon the sun rose on December 26, and the troops returned to their trenches. And the killing resumed.

But here’s the thing: For those 30 hours, they lived as if the Kingdom of God had come in all of its glory. They lived as if the vision had been fully realized: the vision of swords into ploughshares, and wolf lying down with lamb, and peace on earth, good will to all. It was as if Messiah had finally come to stay.

We humans are wired for hope. And hope dares to imagine the seemingly impossible. If you can imagine it, you can mention it. If you can mention it, you can manage it. If you can manage it, then it really is possible.

The desert will bloom, waters will break forth in the wilderness, sorrow and sighing will flee away. To live in hope – to live in faith – is to act as if it is possible. Because it is. Amen.