

Isaiah 35:1-10

- 1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus
2 it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.
- 3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."
- 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
7 the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
- 8 A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
9 No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

DON'T BE AFRAID

Don't be afraid. That phrase is repeated often in the Bible, and it is especially a big part of the Christmas stories.

In our passage for today the prophet encourages the people to bring that message to the weaker members of their community. He tells them to strengthen those with weak hands, trembling knees and a faint heart.

Be strong. Do not be afraid. God is on the way.

That sounds simple enough ...until you hear what was going on with God's people in that day and time. They had plenty to fear.

First, when the prophet spoke, God's people were in exile. We have a hard time understanding just how bad things had gotten for God's people.

EXCESSIVE SPENDING

The story begins well before the exile with (of all things) excessive government spending! Sound familiar?

King Solomon decided to have an empire that would be the envy of all his neighbors. Trouble was he had to oppress the poor and virtually enslave many of his people in order to do it. When you're building an empire sometimes the common people have to suffer, right?

King Solomon got away with it. But, his son did not. The ten tribes of the north revolted against those draconian economic measures, and the country was divided into two parts, (Republicans and Democrats, oh excuse me wrong story) Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

Both of these kingdoms were much weaker apart than they were together, and this left God's people vulnerable to exploitation by her powerful neighbors

MILITARY TERROR

In 721 BC after a series of weak kings in both the north and the south, the inevitable happened. The Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom, Israel and scattered the 10 tribes all over the ancient world. For all practical purposes those people ceased to exist.

The two tribes of the south, Judah escaped total destruction, but they lived in constant fear from global powers that sought to dominate the area. They gave up land and treasure to try and appease the Assyrians. Of course it was never enough.

Judah probably would have suffered the same fate as Israel, but the Babylonians finally defeated the Assyrians in 625 BC.

YEARS OF CAPTIVITY

But, the Babylonians were no better. When God's people unwisely made an alliance with the Egyptians, the Babylonians conquered Judah, and took most of the leading citizens into captivity in Babylon.

It gets worse. Ten years later the puppet government installed by the Babylonians revolts. The Babylonians come back, destroy the temple and leave the country in shambles. That was in 587 BC.

For over 40 years God's people live in exile. Their children begin to speak a foreign language. It looks like all hope is gone.

Let me summarize for you what we've learned so far.

The economy goes in the tank, the military has been defeated, the temple has been destroyed, the country has been ravaged and God's people are far from home in exile. Many family and friends have been killed.

The Babylonian army and a great desert prevent God's people from ever going back to the Promised Land.

And we think we have it bad!

No wonder God's people hung up their harps on the willow trees and refused to sing (Psalm 137). They had nothing to sing about. This kind of misfortune would suck the life out of anyone.

THE DESERT BLOOMS

Who would have the audacity to proclaim a word hope in such a hopeless situation? Isaiah.

It was in this dark world that word of the prophet Isaiah was proclaimed. In a world devoid of hope Isaiah dared to bring God's audacious message,

“Do not fear. This desert is going to bloom. God is going to make a way where there seems to be no way. You are going home.”

More than that, the prophet tells them that the lame are going to leap like a deer, the blind are going to see, the speechless are going to sing, and God is going to deliver us from exile.

VISION AND REALITY

That Isaiah sure knew how to paint a picture of hope.
But, who could believe in such a grand vision when things were so bad?
Shouldn't the vision match reality?

Shouldn't we try to learn to live in Babylon instead of filling our people with such unrealistic dreams?

Babylon isn't so bad. The economy is good. Our children are adapting.
Besides, the way back home is fraught with danger.

Who's going to protect us from the jackals and lions that will attack us on the way?

But, God loved his people too much to leave them in exile. And God loves us too much to leave us in exile either.

Isaiah tells us that God will protect us. Isaiah tells us that God will make a way where there seems to be no way. Isaiah tells us that God is going to lead us back home, and we're going to be singing Christmas carols on the way, tidings of comfort and joy.

IMAGINATION

When we are ordained as leaders in the church we take a vow to lead the people with energy, intelligence and imagination. It was that last word, imagination that got my attention. What did that mean?

Did that mean that I needed to innovative? Should I start (as comedian Flip Wilson) once put it, “The Church of What's Happening Now?”

Innovation is not necessarily a bad thing. “We've always done it that way” does not always have to be the church's motto.

Yet over the years I have come to think about imagination in a different way. I do not lead the church by what I can imagine. I lead the church by what God has imagined.

And God has imagined so much more than any of us could think up on our own!

Who would think that the exiles could ever go home? Who would think that those without speech would one day sing with the Metropolitan Opera? Who could imagine the lame leaping like a deer or the blind being able to see?

That's what it means to lead the people with imagination. It means substituting God's promises for our meager expectations.

A QUESTION FOR JESUS

The gospel lesson for today (Matthew 11:2-11) tells the story of John the Baptist. John is in jail for confronting King Herod's immoral ways, and he knows that he will soon lose his life.

John knew all about leading the people with imagination. He was (according to Jesus) a prophet and more than a prophet. He was the one who prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah.

And yet, even the great prophet had doubts as he faced his own death in the confines of a dark, dank prison cell. He sent his disciples to Jesus and asked, "Are you the one who is to come or should we expect another?"

Jesus replied with words that hearkened back to Isaiah's prophecy. He said, "Go back and tell John what has been happening. The blind see. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. And the poor have good news preached to them."

Jesus took this powerful prophetic vision and kicked it up a notch. Now the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. The kingdom of God is coming, but once again expectations are too small. Even John the Baptist can't imagine the power of that coming kingdom.

But, from his prison cell, by the grace of God he is given a glimpse of the kingdom that comes. He gets to hear good news. The kingdom of God comes in a new and powerful way. It is greater than we could ever imagine.

OUR QUESTION FOR JESUS

When we face a significant financial loss, when we face defeat and failure, when the people we love the most betray us, when we face the cold, dark day of life's end, like John we sometimes have some questions for Jesus.

"Jesus, are you the one or should we expect another?" The troubles of this day have a way of hiding the light. We forget about the blessings of the past, and we cannot imagine a better future.

It is at times like this that we need to hear a prophetic word, a word of poetry that promises more than we can imagine.

We need to think about the desert that blooms with the sweet smell of roses. We need to think about the highway that leads home. We need to imagine a world where all people travel the road safely, and the song of salvation is number one on the hit parade.

FINAL WORDS

Politico reported the final Facebook post of Elizabeth Edwards this past Monday. She wrote,

“I have been sustained throughout my life by three saving graces—my family, my friends and a faith in the power of resilience and hope.

These graces have carried me through difficult times, and they have brought more joy to the good times than I could ever have imagined. The days of our lives, for all of us, are numbered. We know that.”

I like that, three graces that sustain us: family, friends and the power of hope.

The job of the church is to paint a picture of hope. We must let God’s vision of the future capture our imagination. We must learn to see the sweep of history, our own personal history and the history of the world in the context of God’s providential care.

No matter what desert you find yourself in today, know this. God can make it bloom. No matter what danger you face today, know this. God can bring you home safe and sound. No matter how sad you may feel today, know this. God can teach you to sing again.

Elizabeth Edwards had it right. God can bring more joy to our life than we can ever imagine. And when we come to the end of our days, we should not despair because at the end of life we encounter the Eternal One in whose arms we will be carried safely home.

All those things that bedeviled us in life will be no more. No more sorrow. No more pain. No more sickness. No more crying. God will wipe away every tear.

Only God can do that. Only God will bring in the kingdom with power. Only God can make the lame walk and the blind see. Only God can raise the dead.

POINTING TOWARD JESUS

But, there is something we can do to point others toward the one who comes. We can preach good news to the poor. I read an article in Sojourners magazine this past week that showed how one church used its imagination to do just that.

This suburban church had some extra money to give last Christmas, but they also knew that would have to be creative in their use of that money.

They wanted to give to those in need in a way that protected the dignity of those who received. More than that, they also knew that for some folks \$500 would be a gift and for others it would be a curse. They came up with this plan.

Some of the members of this church lived in the inner city, and they were able to come up with a list of people who had had a particularly difficult year:

There was the friend who worked for the shelter that lost funding and had to lay off everyone. There was the neighbor whose house caught fire. There was the family around the corner whose 14-year-old got pregnant this year. And so forth.

They were able to compile quite a list. The list was given to their suburban co-conspirators (as they put it), and they let all of these families to expect a little visit at a set time.

On the appointed night some carolers rolled through the neighborhood. They visited each home with some lovely singing, delivered a plate of baked goodies, and then went on to the next home.

After they are gone the family would find underneath the cookies an envelope containing several hundred dollars with a note that said, "Know that your are loved. Merry Christmas."

Last year they gave away more than \$10,000 to families around the city. The article concluded,

"And the cool thing is the families do not even know who we are. They don't even know the name of the congregation and may never see us again ... all they are left with is a little reminder that they are loved.

So let the 'Christmas Carol Conspiracy' spread. Imagine if every neighborhood had a little conspiracy like this one, and imagine if every suburban congregation began plotting goodness with folks in poverty."

There are Christmas conspiracies all over. Let's get in on the fun. The simplest act of kindness can be a powerful way to preach good news and offer light to those in the darkness.

Many in the world don't know it, but God loves them. Christmas is all about reminding them of that message. Christmas is about a desert that for a season blooms with the sweet smell of roses and the hope of life eternal.

Let us tend that garden. Let us spread that hope.

Amen.