

A Desert That Rejoices

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Pastor Scott Austin

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Tim Kneezel]

Our third reading today, from the prophets, is from the book of Isaiah, chapter 35. It is on page 578 in the red Bibles if you would like to follow along.

¹The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ²it 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.

³Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴Say 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."

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶then 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;

⁷the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

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the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,^[a]
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,^[b]
but it shall be for God's people;^[c]
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.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

So, some of you know that when Tracey and I were first married we lived for a couple of years in Las Vegas, Nevada. Yeah, that was that was my first church job, right out of undergrad, was at a church plant in Las Vegas. Now if you are lucky enough never to have been to Las Vegas [crowd laughs, speaker chuckles], your picture of it is probably, like, lots of casinos, right? And there certainly are lots of casinos in Las Vegas, but most of them are on one single north-south road, Las Vegas Boulevard, aka "the Strip," that runs down and separates the city into east and west, and the rest of the valley, all the way out to the edge of the mountains, is just filled to the brim with one big nightmare of suburban sprawl. Cookie cutter strip malls, boring cul de sacs with identical houses all around them, not a single small business or independent anything to be found anywhere.

But if you drive out far enough past all the lights and past all the sprawl, you eventually come to the desert. And the desert in Las Vegas is mostly red rock, so hills and valleys, all kind of this red-orange color, canyons, and sun—there's a lot of sun. This is the one redeeming quality of the place [chuckles]. Tracey and I would often go out into the desert outside of Las Vegas to go hiking, to kind of get away from this city that never really felt like home to us. But hiking there is nothing like hiking in the northeast. There are no trees, no shade, nothing green, unless you

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count cactus green, which is barely green and barely qualifies. I think you have to buy the 128 crayon box to even get cactus green.

But every once in a while—and I mean like maybe once a year—the conditions are right for what's called *desert bloom*. A desert bloom is what happens when, in a desert climate, it rains hard enough and long enough for the water to get far down enough to the seeds that are dormant, way below the dry soil. And then they germinate and they spring up and they produce flowers, all kinds of flowers. And when the desert is in bloom, it is absolutely breathtaking. You can look up pictures online, but it won't do it justice. Because what was previously barren—and it's not to say that the desert doesn't have its own beauty, because it certainly does—but what was previously barren and seemingly lifeless suddenly has come alive with color and shape; it is totally transformed. And then, after just a few short days, everything fades, the seeds have been scattered, and the desert goes back to normal.

So, having had this experience of seeing a desert in bloom, those memories of being in Las Vegas, you know, 20 years ago now, immediately came back to mind for me when I read the opening lines of today's Hebrew Bible reading, that you just heard read a moment ago, from Isaiah 35: “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.” Now, in this telling of the desert bloom, it's not just that there are blossoms in the desert, but that the desert itself has come alive with rejoicing and singing, and what an incredible image of hopefulness that is—that a desert is personified as a joyful singer.

I think clearly the prophet Isaiah had witnessed a desert bloom, had seen that, and the Lord used that memory to give Isaiah a word of the promise of life to come. By the way, I think and believe that God will do that for you, too. If you have memories and you kind of open yourself to this sort of thing, the Holy Spirit can speak to you through those those memories and experiences.

Now, one of the ways that the prophet goes on to describe the redemption of the people is by saying that the blind will see, and the deaf will hear, and the lame will walk. And that same description is used in several of the lectionary passages this week, which you may have noticed if you read it. And so, I want to take a moment and talk about that, because that kind of language can be challenging for some people, and I want to acknowledge that and maybe tell you why that is, if you're not familiar with it.

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It's not *just* that we have all sort of agreed that it's not kind to categorize people so starkly and impersonally by calling them “the blind” and “the deaf” and “the lame”—and by the way, something that I have stopped myself from doing, and if you ever catch me doing it, I would ask you to gently remind me of this, is to stop using the word “lame” to mean—at all, pretty much, but especially to mean an idea or event that's stupid or ill conceived or unfortunate, as in “That's so lame.” That kind of language is quite hurtful to people with disabilities, and I have tried my best to erase that from my vocabulary. See also, by the way, the word “crazy” which is one of those kind of verbal pauses that just gets thrown in everywhere.

But even beyond that, I think this kind of passage is challenging on a deeper level, which is to say that many people who have disabilities, people who are deaf or blind or who are physically disabled, they don't actually want to be healed of those disabilities. They don't want those characteristics of their identity erased from them. And so, to have the idea of healing from disabilities become symbolic of God's broader good work in the world can be difficult and even maybe feel demeaning to some people. And we Christians have a of a way of making this infinitely worse when we do things like offer prayers of healing for people who didn't ask for them, which happens a lot more often than you might think.

So, I guess my point here is to say that even if the authors of these ancient writings assumed that disabilities were always a negative thing, we should not take that as evidence that God thinks disabilities are a sign of an inherent flaw in a person. And it may be worth noting that in the ancient world, disabilities were much more likely to be truly marginalizing and to prevent flourishing of those who had them, so those pictures of healing I think likely would have been received differently at that time than they are now.

But, even beyond that, in the modern world we are able to work for accessibility and full integration in our society in ways that were never conceived of 3000 years ago. So, perhaps the call for modern people of God is to stop praying for healing, unless someone asks for that, and to start working the courts, and the boards, and the councils, and the housing and transportation authorities, and insist on full, accessible conditions, everywhere in society, so that that's not even a factor in someone's participation in our cities and our spaces. Does that make sense? So that's kind of like a little “bonus” sermon for today.

But I'm seeing Stephanie here in the room, and Stephanie is a person who has, that I want to say thank you to. You're a person who's made me aware of some of this, and you've been very kind and gentle in the way that you've done that, and so, my efforts always when I encounter this kind of text is to help people who maybe haven't heard that side of things to be exposed to

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it. So, I hope that you find that useful, and I hope that I did it some justice as a person who does not have that experience for myself.

So, that being said, I think what the prophet Isaiah is imagining here—and what Jesus, by the way, re-appropriates later, as recorded in the Gospel reading that we heard earlier in our service—is the idea, more generally speaking, that God's work is transformative. And that goes so far beyond the idea of individual physical healing. Even in this passage from Isaiah, it goes way beyond that. God's transformation is also symbolized in this passage in verse 7 as “burning sand that shall become a pool,” “thirsty grounds that become springs of water,” and my favorite one in the passage, “when the haunt of jackals shall become like a swamp.” When is a swamp better than something else? Well, when something else is the haunt of jackals [chuckles]. So, the picture here in this text is of the whole created order awakening to a full and vibrant life, of even the most desolate places becoming fertile and beautiful.

Now, in its original meaning, this prophetic word in Isaiah 35 was intended for the Israelites who were in exile. That's why, later in the passage, you get the promise that the ransomed of Yahweh, the Lord, shall return to Zion. They're out in exile, and the promise is that the ransom of the Lord shall return to Zion (to Jerusalem). That was its original meaning to original audience, but for us, of course, this text speaks to the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah; that's why it's used during the season of Advent. And because we are, as Christians, people who live in this tension between the *already* and the *not yet*, it also offers us the hope of the second coming of Jesus, when all of his work will be completed.

But I wonder if this passage also has meaning for those of you, regardless of your religious affiliation, who find yourselves in a spiritual wilderness. I wonder if you're a person who once maybe had a faith that felt strong, but who now are a person who struggles to believe, who struggles to rejoice, who struggles to sing? I wonder if this promise might be for you. And if you're a person who's in the very bottom of an experience of deconstruction, or if you feel like you're losing your faith, or if you're experiencing serious doubt, I know from experience that when you go to church and there's all this singing—it's just like singing is almost, like, painful, as an experience for someone who's going through that. That might describe you.

But I wonder if this promise might be for you, too, that the ransomed of the Lord shall return to Zion. That if you could trust in the idea that, in some future, you will be through the experience that you're in right now, that you will have been ransomed, like, saved out of this secondary experience of negativity and brought back into something that's new and familiar, all at the same time.

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And so, let me ask us to sit with the language here just for a minute, using that verse, “the ransomed of the Lord shall return,” as a jumping off point. “The ransomed shall return.” I just love the confidence of that verb. The verb tense gives us this sense of assurance. By the way, Bible study trick: print out the passage, or if you’re comfortable marking up a Bible (no, it’s not a sin to do that) go ahead and do it. And when you find a word that’s repeated a bunch of times in a passage, underline it each time or write a square around this word and an oval around that word and a triangle over this word, or some symbol to and show yourself what are the key words in this passage. And if you were to do that with Isaiah 35:1-10 the word “shall” would appear how many times in these 10 verses? Twenty-four times. That is some serious assurance, and that doesn’t even count its cousin “will,” right? [laughter] which appears two times. I just had to put in that cousin “will,” I like that.

So, 26 times you have a verb tense that has this kind of confidence in a future. “The ransomed of the Lord shall return to Zion.” Now, this confidence is coming out of the desert, out of exile. It’s coming from a place where you would not expect to find it. So one thing you could do in your own Bible study during the season of Advent is spend some time going through the readings in the lectionary, and you can find them very easily, and looking at the verb tenses. I know that sounds impossibly nerdy to you and some of you are like scientists or medical professionals or software engineers and you’re like, “I don’t want to do any grammar,” and that’s fine, it’s okay. I don’t want to do any Javascript, but everybody can do this. You should just go and find the verb tenses and wonder for yourself what’s happening here; is this a “shall” moment? Is it a “might” moment? Is it a “will it” moment? For example, in the Magnificat, that beautiful reading that maybe should be the subject of the sermon every year when it comes around but today, this year, is not, Mary says, “The mighty one *has done* great things.” You see the difference between “shall do great things” and “has done great things”? That’s a different kind of confidence in God, isn’t it?

And so let me ask you to do a little thought experiment for yourself. What verb tense would you use to describe God’s work in your life or in the world around you today? Are you in a state of current blessing, in other words, “God has done great things”? Are you in a state of confident hope; “God will do” or “shall do” great things? Are you in a state of cautious hope; “God might _____”? Maybe you’re in a state of despair; “God apparently won’t” or maybe even, “God apparently can’t.” Because there are times when you have the confidence of Mary and times when you have the hopefulness of Isaiah. But sometimes that’s harder to come by. And I do want to affirm as valid all of those verb tenses. You know, the scriptures don’t necessarily take us into the space of “God won’t” or maybe “God can’t” for today’s readings, but the scriptures definitely take us there at other times. And my experience as a pastor talking with people who are in those times of their life is that many people have no idea that the scriptures affirm that

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place, but they do. And it can be very helpful and reassuring when you're in the depths of that experience to know that the psalmists were as well, and some of the prophets were as well, and that does not disqualify them or you from having a meaningful and real experience with God. So I'd like to conclude today with two quick sentiments from the New Testament readings. We've been spending most of the time in the prophet Isaiah here, so I want to go to the New Testament readings from the lectionary, and the first is from the book of James and it concerns patience.

Patience is a good thing for us to be talking about right now. I feel that as a community a lot of patience is being required of us, right? I mean, just the stuff we talked about today, just the way the room feels right now, and we're all being asked to be patient and sometimes doing a great job at that and sometimes having a little more challenge with it. Here's what James says, "Be patient therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord." Remember that second coming. This is a Christian text. "The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near." I love this so much. Seeds lying invisible in the cold ground for months and months and the early rains come and nothing happens until the late rains come. And what was invisible becomes visible. What was real all along becomes apparent. And the farmer knows, so be like the farmer.

And the second is from Jesus, who in the Gospel reading was responding to a question from the disciples of John the Baptist, right? And you may remember John the Baptist was the forerunner to Jesus' own ministry. He prepared the way of the Lord, he was the voice crying out in the wilderness, and he had his own disciples. But he was imprisoned and so he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one?" Can you imagine that? By the way, speaking of sermons that would kind of go alongside the actual sermon today, the idea that John the Baptist, who was the proclaimer of the coming of the Messiah would then have a life experience that led him to a place where he doubted that that was true anymore, and sent his own disciples to talk to Jesus and ask him straight up, "Are you the one or not? Because I ate a lot of locusts and honey. [laughter] I wore some very strange clothing. People did not like me, I am now in prison," etc. etc. So he sent his disciples to Jesus. And Jesus kind of quotes these images from the prophets and sends them back to John, and then he says to the people who had been going out to see John in the wilderness, "What did you go out in the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see — someone dressed in soft robes? Look. Those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces." What then did you go up to see? As if to say, what were you expecting? What did you think you were signing up for? Salvation is not for people who want soft robes. Those people sit in palaces with not a care in the world and they're completely disconnected from the realities that we face, you and I.

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Salvation is for people who are ready to get dirty. To go out to the wilderness, not to sightsee and mark in your little plant journal that you saw this or that reed. But to get down and dirty in the wilderness and to be in the mess and challenge of life. And so we have in the New Testament texts these two kinds of exhortations that are intentionally used with each other. One is a very gentle idea of “be patient” and the other is a little bit more sturdy. So today's sermon was titled, “A Desert That Rejoices.” That's from the imagery in the prophet Isaiah, but I think an alternate title for the sermon could have been, “Be Patient and Get Dirty.” And I think that might actually also make a pretty good motto for the season of Advent; Be patient and get dirty. Let's pray together.

God, as always we are grateful to you for the witness of Holy Scripture. From all these collected texts from times that seem so disconnected from us that it sometimes can be hard to even imagine getting anything from them, and yet we do. Thank you for your spirit's presence with us as we read and understand the Bible. And we pray that the messages in today's readings would sink in with us. That we would be affirmed in whatever experience of life we are having right now of your presence. That we would be like the farmers who are patient even through the months and months where everything seems hidden and dead. And that we would heed the call of Jesus not to seek comfort, or wealth, or soft robes, but rather to go right out into the wilderness and get dirty. Thank you that the incarnation of Jesus gives us a savior who experienced all that for himself. Help us to follow in his example as we experience our own world and may we grow closer to each other and to you, through the power of Jesus the Savior, the Messiah. And it's in his name that we pray, amen.

So our band is going to come back up, we're going to sing another couple songs together, and we're going to celebrate holy communion together as well. And so I invite you to come and receive this sacrament of sustenance, this sacrament of ongoing grace. And you don't need to be a member of our church. Artisan's communion table is an open table. If you want to have this meal with Jesus and His disciples, you are invited to come. Come through the middle aisles and out through the outer isles, dip the bread in the juice or the wine. Remember Christ's body which is broken for you and for me. Remember his blood which is shed for the forgiveness of our sins, and receive that as a strengthening for your tired or hungry souls and selves, and be in community communion with each other as you come as well. As always, if you don't feel ready for communion today or are in a place in your life where you're choosing not to do that, you can simply stay where you are and observe, or think, or pray, or meditate. Whatever you do, I hope that you sense the spirit's presence and God's love for you. The table is open, come if you will. Amen.

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[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).