

12112022 – Sermon – Advent 3 – Joy – Isaiah 35:1-10

At last, we are at Advent 3 – the week of Joy!

You may have noticed that I am straying from Rev. Kim's following of the readings from the book of Matthew this week and have chosen Isaiah instead. Matthew just seemed a bit too full of gloom and doom to me. I need a break from the shouts of John the Baptist right now. The image of a desert rejoicing with blossoms seemed more fitting for a week where we lighten up our Advent journey and celebrate the joy that we know will come soon with the birth of Jesus.

However, this vision of a blooming desert's impact comes from the very fact that deserts are not usually pictured in this way. When we think of a desert, we think of a hot, dry, and desolate wilderness where life is difficult – not flourishing and blooming and running with streams.

Throughout the Bible, deserts are places of hardship. Think of the Exodus when Moses led the people out of Egypt. Imagine the joy and celebration of those slaves when they heard that God was leading them into freedom, leading them home to a land flowing with milk and honey. That promise wasn't handed to them easily; it took a long and arduous journey to get there. That feeling of release and celebration didn't last long though. They suffered so much that they sometimes thought it would be better to be back in Egypt living as slaves. Much of the time, they were tired and hungry and lost. They fought with each other... they put blame on their leader, Moses... they turned to the magical promises of idols, and away from God who expected them to work hard toward achieving that promised reward. Moses, God's chosen leader, who worked so hard to keep that band of wanderers on the path, never even got to see the end of the journey, never got to set foot in that promised paradise. A journey through the desert is hard.

In the New Testament, we encounter desert wilderness again. Jesus is baptized by John, the heavens open and God endorses the beloved one who will change the world – and immediately chases him into the wilderness to face the temptations of Satan – easy outs, a quick way to fix the world without the kind of hard work needed to make that fix last. Jesus had to come to terms with the fact that being God's beloved wasn't a ticket to paradise but a call to face the injustices and inequities in the world and fight for something better.

Every time we encounter the desert in our holy book, it seems the message is that you have to go through a lot of wilderness before you ever get a glimpse of paradise – and sometimes you never get to see that desert bloom... so much for Joy!

So, what is Isaiah trying to tell us in this passage... and why did the creators of the Lectionary decide that it was a good passage for the third week of Advent, the week of Joy?

The time that this first section of Isaiah was written was not a joyous time in the history of the Jewish people. They had been defeated in yet another war. They were in exile and enslaved by their enemies. It was a time of complete despair. Joy must have seemed impossible... as impossible as turning a dry and desolate wilderness into a blooming, vibrant, life-giving

paradise. Would they have bought it, this message of hope? Did they think Isaiah was telling them to hang in there, that they would wake up one morning to find that God had solved all the issues that were making them feel so defeated, so dried up and barren? Or did they hear a different message of hope, a hope that involved taking some new kind of action?

What does it take to make a desert bloom?

I took a look this week at some articles about the kinds of plants that live in deserts and what conditions are needed to make them bloom. What does it take to make a cactus or a succulent bloom? Perhaps some of you care for these plants at home and have some experience with that concept. Here's what I found:

Some cactus species take dozens of years to mature – some even more than 50 years! That's a long time to wait for flowers! It would take a lot of patience and determination to care for a plant that long in hope of experiencing even one blossom. You might not even see it happen in your own lifetime – but if you don't put in the effort, no one else will see it either...

You need to water these plants regularly – but you can't just water whenever you think of it because over watering will harm them. You have to wait till the soil is completely dry. You can't just set an alarm on your phone and keep a measuring cup close by; you need to pay attention because the amount of water they need varies with the temperature and the time of year.

They also need nutrients to be healthy, nutrients you need to add to the soil or the water.

In order to be able to bloom, a cactus plant needs a time of dormancy – a rest – in cool temperatures but with plenty of sunlight. If they don't get enough light, they get pale and soft, and then they definitely won't bloom.

This was advice about house plants, plants that aren't even native to our part of the world. This advice is for nurturing plants that we have brought into our homes, a place where we have some control over the environment. How does all this transfer to plants living out in a desert, in the wild?

Well, deserts don't bloom every year. It only happens in years when the rainfall is unusually high – but not so high that the plants get too much water. That can be as harmful as too little. They even need the dust that blows around out there – because those dust particles carry nutrients to the soil that those plants need to keep going. Seems pretty miraculous to me! And the other miraculous thing to me is that those deserts, even though they seem so dry and desolate in those years where the rainfall isn't just right – they aren't dead places! There is life there, strong, resilient, adaptive life, if you know where to look!

So, I think about those people who Isaiah was addressing. They were experiencing a kind of drought in their lives. They had been moved to a place that was foreign to them, a place where the conditions weren't the same as at home. They were uncomfortable there. They were not

being provided with the things that made them healthy and comfortable – different foods, different customs, no real way of knowing what to expect next, no way to control the environment in which they found themselves, no way to just pack up and leave. How could they make their desert bloom?

“Tell those who are scared ‘Be strong! Do not fear!’” says Isaiah.

There is a way through this desert – a straight highway that you can’t miss. It doesn’t take any special skill to follow this road – even fools can follow it and not get lost. It will lead you home to Zion full of joy and singing.

You can do this! But you need to strengthen weak hands and make firm the feeble knees and encourage those who are cowering under these conditions. Remember that God is here - and on your side – the side of justice.”

When we look around our world right now, we can imagine there are many people feeling the way those people felt so long ago... war in Ukraine, violent oppression in Iran, drought in Somalia, flooding in Pakistan, a worldwide pandemic, the threat of climate change... It’s hard sometimes to not buckle under the weight of the worry, to be blind and deaf to the hope that is still in the world.

Was Isaiah’s vision of a blooming desert just a nice fairy tale to make the people of his time feel happy for a moment or were they supposed to believe that it could and would come to pass? Does Isaiah’s message give us an opportunity for turning our modern day worry into joy?

How do you make a desert bloom?

Every single plant in that desert needs to find the things it needs in the place where it is planted. Unlike the cactus or succulent that is put in a pretty pot and kept on a windowsill in the home of a person with a green thumb, desert plants have to be constantly ready to soak up every bit of moisture that comes their way, ready to catch those bits of nutrients that float by on the breeze on their prickly or hairy skin. They have to grow roots deep and wide to stand strong when a storm hits and pummels them with sand. And I’m sure that even plants hope, perhaps even pray, for rain.

On the surface, a desert may seem like a desolate and dead place. Look closely and you’ll find that’s not the case. There are little insects and microbes that carry life-giving particles from one place to another. There are even sometimes tiny little flowers, too small to be noticed unless you are looking for them – flowers that are not just pretty, but that provide the means for new life to grow with the help of those insects. Even in the harsh conditions of a desert, life goes on.

Every day we hear stories in the news of war and violence, of people being cruel to others. We hear of species becoming extinct, of climate change that is changing the face of this planet that we depend on to survive. It can be overwhelming, make us weak in the knees, make us feel that what needs to be done is too much for our small hands.

But, Isaiah reminds us that even deserts can bloom, that joy is possible in even the harshest places. Remember the people of Kiev who were seeking cover from the bombing in that subway station... remember the little girl who stood up and sang with a big smile on her face. Remember the smiles and hugs that surrounded her as she sang. There is joy even in the scariest times of war if we look for it... if we create it. Even a small act of joy can be life-giving if we stop and pay attention, if we open our eyes to see it and open our ears to hear its message of hope.

And so, in the middle of this time of waiting for Christmas, a time when our Bible readings seem bleak and the messages from John the Baptist and the prophets are harsh, we light one pink candle, a small glimmer of hope and the joy that is to come. A reminder to look up, to listen, to speak joy, dance joy, and spread joy even in the midst of our worries.

We don't live in a desert. We don't live in a war-torn country, or a place that is suffering drought or floods or erupting volcanoes... but we have our own worries too. We worry about climate change, inflation, the rising cost of everything in the midst of salary freezes, of the spread of Covid that seems to be rampant again just when we thought we were clear... It's easy to sink into despair. But don't let it make you blind to the beauty of a winter day, or deaf to the excitement of children anticipating a visit from Santa. This is a time to seek out, celebrate, and share all the joy that lives in spite of the world's woes – not to ignore those worries, but to do our part in spreading hope, peace and love to lighten the darkness. These are the nutrients we need to be able to do our part in making the desert bloom. In opening ourselves to joy, we also open ourselves to possibilities, to the potential for a transformation as miraculous as vibrant blossoms in a place that seemed devoid of life.

My friend and neighbour, Rev. Tony Boonstra, posted something on Facebook this week that really resonated with me as I struggled with my message for today. He said, "I can choose to try to change the world and other people – quite an undertaking - or I can choose to respond in a way that is healthy and life giving for all involved."

A wise message that I believe speaks to the power of joy. We can't do it all, even Jesus couldn't transform the world in his lifetime... but that didn't stop him from sowing the seeds of that new possibility. It didn't stop him from nurturing the life he found in that difficult world. Perhaps he didn't see it bloom in his lifetime but he got the process started. Do we say, "See, it didn't work even for Jesus," and give up in despair? ... or do we look for signs that the plan is maturing and, if we keep nurturing it the way he did, that transformation is possible – just as possible as a blooming desert.

As we continue our journey through Advent, we can be aware that there will still be hard times to come; there will still be disturbing news on our radios, televisions, and social media...but we can also remember that there is still the potential for that world that God dreams of for creation. My wish for you is to find the seedlings of hope around you. Sprinkle them with love; nurture them with plenty of joy and celebration. Given the right conditions, even this desert can bloom!

May it be so. Amen.