

From the images of military weaponry that become farming implements in Isaiah 2 to the peaceable kingdom and little child of Isaiah 11, we have now come to the images of a trackless desert transformed to a paradise in bloom with a highway running straight through it. My aunt Ruth and uncle Lisle, and their three sons, lived in Albuquerque when I was growing up. I can remember making the long drive in my dad’s Ford Falcon station wagon from western PA to the mesas and deserts of the southwest. It became one of my favorite places. New Mexico is a place of beauty and warmth even though it gets quite cold in the winter. I found the desert portions of New Mexico to be a foreign landscape for a kid from Pennsylvania. Cacti and sagebrush are quite a contrast to maple trees and mountain laurel. The “Land of Enchantment” is the official nickname for the state of New Mexico. Enchanting it was when my dad and I went on a fishing trip with my uncle and my cousins. Getting there, however, in 1963 was a three-day cross-country journey for our family that covered over 1600 miles.

When God’s people returned from exile, depending on what route the returnees took, their journey was 500 miles as the crow flies, straight across a blazing desert. Or it could have been between 1000 and 1600 miles if they followed a more northerly route that kept them closer to civilization and to the water supplies. No matter how they went, it was a daunting journey for even the strongest men and women, let alone the weak or infirmed. The mere prospect of such a journey on foot would give “*feeble hands, weak knees, and fearful hearts*” to even the most eager pilgrim.

Many of us can relate to being in “*the desert and the parched land.*” Some of us have been sick for a long time or suffer chronic afflictions. Others are far from home, alone in a far-off place, while still others have been lost in a wilderness with only scarce resources and nowhere to go for help. In circumstances like these we all have “*sorrow and sighing*” in our hearts and on our lips, as verse 10 refers to. For folks like us, Isaiah 35 offers a beautiful picture of hope and joy. At the heart of it is the simply stated promise of verse

4: “*Your God will come...he will come to save you.*” That’s the message of Advent in every year and the imagery of Isaiah 35 gives this promise a particular color and texture. When your God comes to save you, he will transform your desert into a garden and create a highway that leads you from exile to home.

David McKenna summarizes the dimensions of this transformation with five handy titles I’d like to borrow:

- From Wasteland to Garden, verses 1-2
- From Weak to Strong, verses 3-4
- From Lame to Leaping, verses 5-6
- From Burning to Bubbling, verses 6-7
- From Wilderness to Highway, verses 8-10

When we are going through a desert experience, personally, it is almost impossible to imagine what hope looks like. The poet prophet uses word pictures to stimulate our imagination. Imagine the wilderness itself rejoicing because its once barren landscape has burst into life. A carpet of colorful crocuses covers the ground, the soaring cedars of Lebanon and the mighty oaks of Carmel replace the scrub brush, and the roses of Sharon dot the formerly colorless ground. In this improbable transformation, the glory and splendor of God himself will be displayed. As the heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands, as Psalm 19 says, the transformed desert is a testimony to the power and grace of God. As a result, “*all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.*”

The prophet now uses this spectacular transformation to encourage those with feeble hands, shaking knees, and fearful hearts. “*Be strong, do not fear; your God will come....*” (v. 4). The next words will strike some of you as the wrong message: “*he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.*” In a day when we emphasize grace for all, this seems out of step with the gospel.

But our reaction may reveal our privileged lives. Most of us have not been ravaged, robbed, raped, and kidnapped as the Jews had been. For those who cower in exile or trudge through a desert, the promise that God will make it right is a comforting word. We shouldn't read "*vengeance*" and "*divine retribution*" as acts of angry revenge, but as the action of a God who is just and who makes the wrong right. Victims can only hope that one day it will happen. Isaiah assures us that it will.

What's more, the coming of God to save will bring health to those who have lived with limitations and disease: "*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy*" (v. 5). Some scholars take this in a spiritual sense; those who are deaf to the gospel and unable to move toward God will be enabled by grace to repent and believe. That may be so, but it is surely no accident that when God came to save his people in the person of Jesus, Jesus physically healed people. That wasn't incidental to his ministry; it was a tangible sign that the day spoken of by Isaiah in chapter 35 had arrived. Indeed, Jesus himself quoted these very verses when John the Baptist asked if Jesus really was the Messiah (Luke 7:22).

Returning to the picture of a desert in bloom, the prophet explains how that could happen. God who controls the waters above the earth and the waters in the earth will abundantly water the dry land with artesian wells gushing water—*streams in the desert*—bubbling springs, and oases with pools of water. There will be so much water that "*in the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow*" (v. 7) as they do in the far-off land of Egypt. Is that a subtle way of saying that even as Israel once escaped Egypt and journeyed through a wilderness to reach the Promised Land, so Israel will escape Babylon through a desert and return to the Promised Land?

That second return will be different, says the prophet, because they will not wander in a trackless wilderness. There will be a highway straight through this blossoming desert. We can imagine the Exiles asking, "But how can we get

there from here?” It’s a question we all ask when we can’t see a way through our troubles and the Enemy instills despair by whispering yet another lie, “You can’t get there from here. You’re stuck. You’re lost; there’s no hope for you.”

Don’t listen to the Hopeless One, says the prophet, because “*a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way.*” That title—the Way of Holiness—might point to the qualifications for those who would travel this road, but what’s most important is not so much the travelers, but the provider of this miraculous Way. It is a highway that only “*the redeemed...and those the Lord has rescued*” will walk. You see, those words point to the fact that this road has been constructed by the Holy One of Israel, who will redeem and “ransom captive Israel.”

Yes, this is a limited access highway, but you don’t gain access by being good or paying a ticket price. You get on the highway to heaven by being rescued by a Good God. It is the Way of Grace that anyone can walk by trusting him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. How are we to get home from our “distant country?” How can we survive and navigate our parched desert places? Only by trusting the One who the demon possessed called, “*The Holy One of God*” (Luke 4:34). We don’t have to pay a toll to get on this superhighway, because that price has been paid. Not accidentally, Isaiah 40 says that it is the Lord himself who will travel this highway through the desert. He walked the Way of Holiness, so that we could too.

Isaiah 35 began with the desert shouting for joy, and it ends with the joy of the redeemed. Because their God has come to save them, verse 10 tells us, “*They will enter Zion with singing, everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*” We’re not there yet, so Advent is a time of waiting, expectation, anticipation, especially for those who have much sorrow and sighing. But this lovely picture in Isaiah 35 assures us that the God who came to save us will come again to transform our deserts and lead us home. Psalm 30:5 says, “*Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes with the morning.*”

The writer J.R.R. Tolkien once coined a uniquely delightful term: “eutastrophe.” It is the opposite of the more common term “catastrophe.” We know what it can be like to be filled with terror, dread, and fear if we have experienced a catastrophe. We can recall the mournful sorrow that filled the voice of the radio announcer who broadcast live as he watched the airship Hindenburg burst into flames before his very eyes. Or we can remember the cold tingles that went up our spines and the weakening of our knees as we watched jets fly into the Twin Towers on 9/11. But when a “eutastrophe” occurs, we are similarly overcome but with good things. We get dizzy with joy, filled with happiness, delirious with excitement! The day will come, Isaiah says, when the joy of the redeemed characterizes our everyday lives. It will be a “eutastrophe!”

“Joy,” C.S. Lewis famously wrote, “will be the serious business of heaven.” Indeed, joy will fill the entire landscape of God’s New Creation. It will be tangible and palpable in such a way that all our sighings and sorrows will have no choice, as the prophet says, but to flee away. Sadness will get chased out of God’s New Creation the way mice flee from a room full of cats. Sorrow will dissipate the way a strong wind will blow every cloud from the sky to leave nothing but a pure blue sky—so beautiful as to make tears fill your eyes.

Jesus my Savior and Lord has done for me what my uncle did for us on our New Mexico fishing trip when I was but a lad of 8 years. He showed me the way through the desert, so that I could find my way home, while singing for joy. I wouldn’t say that “*everlasting joy*” has crowned my head every day since I began my journey with the Lord, but I’ve certainly witnessed *streams in the desert*, and I have been given a foretaste of the joy that is to come. For the moment, “sorrow and sighing have fled away” and heaven and nature sing!

And believe me when I say that this is *no exaggeration* of what the coming of the Messiah means for us! Amen.