

12-7-22

Third Sunday in Advent.

Pastor Priewe

Text: Isaiah 35:1-11

Theme: This Changes Everything!

In the name of the One who will come and make rivers of living water flow out from within us.

The driest most desolate place I've ever been was on top of a plateau in Southern Israel called Masada. It was about a hundred degrees the day we were up there, but after an hour or two up there, it felt like a thousand degrees. At the bottom of the plateau where the gift shop is, they have signs everywhere that say, "Don't go up there without bringing (or buying) water." Far off in the distance you can see the Dead Sea in the haze. They call it the dead sea because it's so salty that nothing can live or survive in its water. It's where the Jordan River goes to die. The water is evaporating so fast, there may not even be a Dead Sea in another century. It might finally die once and for all.

And on the other side of the Dead Sea, it only gets worse. There's 500 miles of nothing but the Arabian Desert all the way to Babylon, with not a speck of water on the map anywhere. Now imagine you were a little boy or girl from the tribe of Judah, living in Jerusalem, and Isaiah the prophet started prophesying about your hometown and your country, "**The land dries up and wastes away, Lebanon is ashamed and withers; Sharon is like the Arabah (that desert by the Dead Sea), and Bashan and Carmel drop their leaves.**" (Isaiah 33:9). Those are fruitful, lush places! That'd be like saying that Hawaii and Florida are going to turn into the desert in Arizona, and Door County isn't going to grow grapes or cherries anymore.

Not just that, but Jerusalem, the city of David, the capital, is going to be sieged, and overtaken, and destroyed, and its people are going to be taken off into captivity in Babylon 500 miles away across that big desert. And the prophet Isaiah says it's your people's fault because they were unfaithful. "**Jerusalem staggers, Judah is falling; their words and deeds are against the LORD, defying his glorious presence.**" (Isaiah 3:8). Then everything Isaiah prophesies comes true. The enemies come and destroy your home and drag you off as an exile and slave, which means now you're going to walk from Jerusalem to Babylon. But you can't even take the 500 miles straight route because nobody can survive that desert, so you have to take the 900-mile scenic route all the way up and around, a journey that takes about four months. It makes my feet hurt and my mouth dry just thinking about it.

How do you think you'd feel when you got to Babylon? Hopeful? Chipper? Ready to live your life as a slave in exile? I don't think so! One of the exiles records for us what it was like in Babylon, "**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"**" (Psalm 137: "Sing us some of those happy songs and hymns, slaves!") they teased.

Do you think you'd survive? That's about the most depressing and terrible situation I can think of? How would you find the strength to carry on? Where would you find hope? How would you feel about God? How would you manage to feel anything but doubt about his promises? Where's that Messiah that God's been talking about forever? When's he going to show up and fix everything? When are we going to see some results? Why is my life the way it is? Why is everything so broken? Does he even see? Does he even care about me?

Now let me ask you this; did you stop imagining at some point that you were a little Israelite captive in Babylon? Did those questions stop being hypothetical and start to sound like the real doubts and questions in your head and heart? Maybe you do feel like you're living in a dry weary land without water, or the frozen tundra of Wisconsin. Maybe you do feel like you've got a thirst that can't be quenched and the songs of joy in your heart are long gone. And you are wondering when Jesus is going to fix everything like he said he would, or if he even cares about you, or if he's even real?

Did you know some followers of John the Baptist and possibly even John himself were wondering those same things? Now commentators debate about whether John himself doubted, but somebody was, him or his followers. John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "**Are you the one who is to**

come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3). See, John the Baptist was in prison and the bad circumstances he was facing made people wonder, “Where is the One who was coming? Where is that Messiah? If he is the One, then why haven’t things changed yet? Wasn’t he supposed show up and baptize us with the Holy Spirit and Fire? They wanted to see some progress, some restoration of the earthly kingdom, or at least some fire falling from heaven, and they wanted to know why their fortunes hadn’t changed yet. Why was Jesus was leaving his Forerunner John the Baptist languish in jail.

The devil uses those kinds of bad circumstances and hardships to convince us that God’s promises are just a mirage in the desert. Every where you look off in the distance, it looks like there’s a sheet of water and an oasis waiting for you, but you keep walking and walking, and you never get there. Your feet never get wet and the water never comes. It feels like he never delivers on his promise. And then the devil gets you to change directions and start chasing his own mirage, walking in circles in every direction after a figment of your imagination that is never going to quench your thirst.

So what answer did John’s disciples get when they got to Jesus, **“Go back and report to John what you hear and see; The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”** (Matthew 11: The things Jesus was doing when he came were the exact answers to things Isaiah the prophet had prophesied 700 years before hand. **“Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy!”** (Isaiah 35:5,6).

Jesus was going around Galilee fulfilling and proving with physical signs and miracles the fact that he really was the Messiah and that he was delivering on every promise of God. He was giving us reason to keep on believing that we can trust every promise Isaiah made about him. And what had Isaiah said 7 centuries before to the thirsty weary exiles who were going to collapse before taking one more step., **“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”** Isaiah 35:3,4

Just as God’s Old testament people were waiting for the Messiah to come the first time, now we are living in a period of waiting, waiting for him to come back for us. And the longer the wait gets, the more the doubts surface. But your God is not going to abandon you to your enemies or let you die of weariness in the desert. He promises that he will come to save you, and when he comes—**this changes everything!** **“Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground [becomes] bubbling springs.”** Isaiah 35:6b,7. The wilderness and the desert are getting a complete makeover. God is going to change the dry land back into an oasis. The wilderness is going to burst into bloom with bright purple spring flowers like the crocus.

It all sounds so wonderful and beautiful and hopeful, but it might leave you wondering, “Where is it? When is that going to happen?” Because right now this place still feels like a desert most of the time. Children are still born who won’t be able to see or hear or speak or walk. Where’s the mute singing and the lame leaping? And this highway for the exiles through the desert back from captivity—how come that never happened? They had to walk back the same 4 month 900-mile journey they came on.

It’s here we have to remember Messiah’s words. “My kingdom is not of this world.” **“The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed,²¹ nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.”** (Luke 17:20) The Messiah has come to reign in your heart and one day he will bring us to his kingdom from another place where everything will be a new and lush and green and perfect, and my daughter will sing for joy and leap like a deer. But that time has not yet come, and yet it doesn’t mean nothing is different now. Jesus’ coming still changes everything, but in this life, we see the changes on inside, in our hearts.

Jesus says, **“Whoever, believes in me, as Scripture said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” (John 7:38).** God comes and changes dried and hardened hearts into rivers of water, a desert into an oasis. One time the Messiah met woman who didn’t know he was the Messiah. She had broken her way through every relationship she ever had, and now the one she was on was no better than the rest. But Jesus was intent on giving living water to drink. He said to her, **“Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”** (John 4:14).

When the Messiah gives that water, then nothing is ever the same again. When Jesus gives us faith to trust every promise God has made to us, then we begin to experience joy again, even in the wilderness of this world. Then we get to walk on the highway through the desert that God has paved to bring us back to himself. The wicked won’t get to walk there, but **“only the redeemed will walk there, only those the Lord has recued will return. “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,”** (Isaiah 35:9,10) just as God promised. Thanks be to God, for he us brought us through faith into the kingdom of the Son he loves, the Messiah he promised and delivered, the *One who comes and changes everything!* Amen.

Let the one who is thirsty come and take the free gift of the water of life. Amen.