

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Isaiah 35:1-10

SERMON TITLE: Signs & Visions: Wilderness Transformation

Isaiah's words evoke powerful images: wilderness, dry land, desert, burning sand, thirsty ground, a haunt for jackals. I picture a burning sun high in the noon day sky; heat glowing and shimmering off the earth's surface; hills like dust heaps; limestone blistered and peeling; rocks bare and jagged; wind hot and dry; bones parched and picked clean by scavenging beasts.

For Isaiah, wilderness is a place of exile, a place other than home, a place where God seems no where to be found. The wilderness is an inhospitable place that threatens life, a terrifying place that strikes fear in the heart, a deathly place that occasions sorrow and sighing. The wilderness is a place of affliction where the blind, the deaf and the speechless dwell. The wilderness saps our strength so that our hands grow weak and our knees wobble.

Sometimes we live in the wilderness, if not literally, then figuratively. During Israel's exile in Babylon, God's people lived in a figurative wilderness that was more a state of mind and heart than an actual geographic location. They were in a strange and foreign land, defeated, captive, uncertain, isolated, and insecure. They questioned God, they doubted their identity, and they longed to go home to Zion, but with no apparent way out.

And sometimes we live in the wilderness—even today—even during this season of the year with all of the greenery and the lights and the beautiful music. This is one man's experience of wilderness: "It was not a hasty decision. I had thought about it many times. The spare, small room in which I had just awakened was filled with reminders of the many reasons why I had to go on living, but I had put them behind me now. My wife of nearly twenty years lay sleeping gently beside me. A photograph of our two children, a boy and a girl, looked gravely down at me from the wall. . . . There was a small painting of our house in Connecticut in a village by the sea. There were many reasons why I should want to live.

“And yet I lay there coolly planning by suicide. I would do it this coming night. The pills lay ready to hand in a small bottle on the table beside my bed. In a few hours I would swallow them, all of them.

“Why?”

“My life had turned inside out so that everything I saw was a photographic negative. Where there should have been joy, I could only feel unending sadness. Where I should have felt hope, there was only despair. Where life with its continuing promise should have sustained me, only the oblivion of death attracted me now, for living had become a hell on earth.” (Percy Knauth, *A Season in Hell*, p. 46.)

Have you ever lived in the wilderness—weak, alone, empty, afraid? I have. There have been times in my life when I’ve questioned God’s presence and power. There have been times when I’ve been close to despair at ever finding the strength to live the life that God has called me to live. So I know about the wilderness.

But here’s the good news: There is a way out! God made a promise through the prophet Isaiah and the promise is being kept. It first began when Israel returned home from exile. And then in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus Christ into our midst as our savior. With his coming, the wilderness is being transformed, the desert is rejoicing, the dry land is blooming, the water is flowing, weak hands are being made strong, wobbly knees are being made firm, the afflicted are being healed, a highway—a Holy Way—of safety has opened up for us. We have been ransomed and redeemed. There is singing and joy. We have seen the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Look to the stable. Look to the cross. It is Jesus Christ. “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.”

Do we see it? God has made for us a way out! God doesn't intend to leave us in the wilderness. The promise is being kept. And the signs of transformation are all around us.

For example, a former seminary president named Al Winn tells the story of a chapel service in which a colleague on the faculty shared a part of his "wilderness" journey. The story began tragically. The faculty member and his wife "had lost their first born child, a little girl named Jennifer 'with flowing hair and dancing eyes.' These two parents were thrust into a wilderness of darkness and pain. "God was nowhere to be found. 'Where,' cried Al's friend, 'was the God of love and mercy?' No answer!"

"Spring came and the flowers bloomed. 'How dare the flowers bloom if Jennifer isn't here to see them! Where is the God of love and mercy? Why doesn't God keep the flowers from blooming?'

"Autumn came and the leaves turned to a riot of color. 'How dare the leaves turn if Jennifer isn't here to see them! Where is the God of love and mercy? Why doesn't God keep the leaves from turning?'

"Spring came again . . . and something began to happen . . . to bloom . . . in his friend's heart. Slowly, like the opening of a rose, he became aware that the God of love and mercy was not absent, not really. Indeed, the God of love and mercy had been there all along . . . right through the depths of the tragedy, right at the heart of his pain.

"And then, Al said, without another word, his friend gave to everyone present in the chapel service that morning . . . a rose! Al said: 'that rose was one of the most significant gifts I ever received.'" (quoted in a sermon entitled, "God's Back," by Donald L. Simmonds.)

My brothers and sisters, there is a way out! Transformation is possible. The promise is being kept in Jesus Christ. The signs are all around us. Thanks be to God! Amen.