

Advent 3A

Text: Isaiah 35

Title: The Desert Comes to Life

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The largest lake in Australia is Lake Eyre. It's the thirteenth largest lake in the world. But you wouldn't know it by looking at it. In fact, most of the time, Lake Eyre looks like a giant mud puddle. Only a few of the deepest ends of the lake have water year round, and even there it's only a foot or two deep.

Lake Eyre is located in the middle of a desert. One of the most forbidding places on the planet. In the summer, the average daytime temperature is 100 in the shade, but 120-130 is not unusual, and it occasionally hits 140 or above. And the average rainfall is a little over 4 inches a year.

There are a few rivers that flow into Lake Eyre, but these are usually dry, too. Most of the water that flows into them evaporates long before it reaches the lake. But every two or three years, there is enough rain in the far north, along the coastal rainforests, that some water finds its way into Lake Eyre. And about every 25 years there is enough rainfall to totally fill the lake.

When the Lake is full, everything changes. Plants and flowers spring to life. Fish are hatched and seem to appear out of nowhere. And millions upon millions of birds flock from miles around to come to the lake. Pelicans fly hundreds of miles from the ocean to catch the fish and to nest at the lake. It's a sight to behold. The desert comes to life.

This is the picture Isaiah gives- the desert coming to life.

Israel was a dry land, surrounded by desert. To the South lay the Negev and the Sinai peninsula, where they had wandered for forty years. To the East lay the vast wasteland of the Arabian desert.

In these deserts there were many dry creek beds that rarely saw water. But where they did, the desert would come to life with flowers and animals rejoicing in the oases.

This is how Isaiah pictures the coming of the Lord. When the Lord came down that highway that was made level, to reach the gates that were open, all of creation would rejoice to meet Him.

Pools and streams of water would appear in the desert. Flowers would bloom. Animals would find refreshment.

All of creation would be restored, not just the plants and animals, but the people, too. The eyes of the blind would be opened. The ears of the deaf would be unstopped. The lame would leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute would sing.

This is what it would look like when the Lord came.

So when it came time to prepare the way of the Lord, where did John the Baptist go? Out in the wilderness. In the desert. He was there to get the people ready for the streams and the flowers and the coming paradise.

But things didn't turn out the way that John expected. And instead of finding himself in the midst of paradise, John found himself in prison.

And after awhile John began to have questions. Was Jesus really the one who was to come? If Jesus really was the Messiah, then where were the streams and the flowers? Why didn't He destroy the wicked? Why hadn't He begun to reign? And most importantly, why am I in prison?

You've probably asked yourself these questions, too. If Jesus really is God, then why are things so bad? Why is there still pain and disease and death? Why is there evil and injustice and suffering? Why is there poverty and famine and natural disasters? Didn't Jesus come to fix all that? Where is the paradise we have been expecting?

The clues to the answer are hidden throughout our scripture lessons today. First, listen to Jesus. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."

Yes, Jesus did make changes in His world. He healed the sick and raised the dead, and He preached Good News. These were big things.

Consider the kinds of miracles that Jesus did. The miracles were not just magic tricks to prove His power. Each miracle begins to undo the curse of creation. Each miracle takes a fallen, broken creation and begins to put it back together.

But it wasn't all at once, as people expected. Jesus didn't heal and raise everyone. But Jesus miracles point forward to what He will do when He returns. When Jesus returns He will complete His work. He will raise all the dead. He will give to all the faithful everlasting life. And He will bring with Him a new heavens and a new earth.

So listen to James next. <sup>7</sup>"Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup>You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

So be patient, like a farmer waiting for the rain. The rain will come, and when it comes, it will bring life and abundance. But we need to wait just a little longer. In a little while the Lord will return. He will come down that highway and the world will be changed. The desert will come to life.

Finally, listen to our introit and its antiphon, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say: Rejoice." And listen to the verses that follow, <sup>5</sup>"Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.

The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup> do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Paul call us to rejoice, even though the Lord has not yet returned. He is coming. It is sure. We know it is going to happen, and so we can celebrate a little early.

That’s what the rose colored candle proclaims today. The candle calls you to rejoice, even now in Advent.

We know that Christmas is coming. It is sure. The Lord promised and the Lord delivered. We can celebrate a little early, even though Christmas is still nearly two weeks away.

It is the same with Jesus’ second coming. We know Jesus coming soon. It is sure. The Lord promised and the Lord will deliver. We can celebrate now, because we know that Jesus will be returning.

When Jesus returns, it will be like rain in the desert, like streams of water, like springs bubbling up from the ground.

Take a look around and see what a desert this world has becoming. Everywhere around you is death and thirst. It’s a barren wasteland out there. Sin has destroyed the life and the beauty of God’s creation. So the Lord is going to come back and bring life and beauty back to His creation.

Until that day, though, the Lord has granted you a little oasis here at the altar. Here the gifts of life flow to you through bread and wine. Here you are granted life and health and healing.

Imagine a traveler stranded in the desert. He’s dying of thirst and barely able to crawl. And just as it seems like he’s about to die, he comes over a sand dune to find an oasis. He manages to pick himself up and stumbles to the waterhole and the water brings him back to life.

There’s a great line in one of our communion hymns that goes like this:

On sin-parched lips the chalice pours  
His quenching blood that life restores.

We come here each week like travelers in the desert, looking for water, dying for water. And here the Lord quenches our thirst with His very body and blood. He refreshes us, but he also sends us back out into the desert to continue our nomadic life.

As you leave today, you will meet fellow travelers. They will be thirsting for something more. Bring them back here with you to the fountain of living water, Jesus Christ Himself. Tell them where they can find life and healing.