

Isaiah 35.1-10

December 9, 2016

“Deserts Shall Bloom”

***“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice
and blossom.”***

***“When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent
word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to
come, or are we to wait for another?”***

I find it intriguing that our lectionary readings have linked these two passages together. One is a message of hope and joy and the other is a struggle for faith. In the book of Isaiah, we hear the prophet share a vivid vision of a blossoming desert. This is yet another powerful dream of peace like his dream of weapons being transformed into farm equipment and wolves and lambs contentedly lying down together. In the gospel of Matthew, we meet a doubting John sitting all alone in the dark dampness of his prison cell.

We could explore the link between these two passages from a historical perspective. John and Isaiah are part of a long tradition of prophets who spoke through the centuries about the coming Messiah. Both shared a hope that this Messiah, or anointed one, would restore the fortunes of the once great nation of Judah and Israel. They both dreamed of a time of peace and a time of liberation from their oppressors.

We could also explore this link from a theological perspective. Both John and Isaiah see the coming of the Messiah as having something to do with the blind seeing, the lame walking and the deaf hearing. John and Isaiah agree that the Messiah is about God journeying to the margins and bringing wholeness.

We could explore the link between these two stories from a socio-political view as well. Both Isaiah and John would remind us that the kingdom of God is very different than the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom in comparison to the

structures of most political entities. John and Isaiah would also agree that God is on the side of the poor and demands that we create structures that ensure justice for all people.

There is also an experiential link to these two passages and it is that link that I most want to explore today. Our faith is something that we experience. It is something that changes us. It is something that moves us. It touches us on a profoundly deep emotional level. Our faith empowers us to be all that we can be as humans. Yes, our faith is historical and rational, but it is much more than a good intellectual theory. Our faith has the power to transform us and our world. Therefore, I invite us to tarry for a moment with these two stories and feel our way into them. They have some light to share with us on an emotional level, if we have a heart open to hear.

In our gospel passage, John finds himself in prison. He has spoken out against the king. The king did not appreciate John's criticism. King

Herod may have also been threatened by John's growing popularity.

Herod attempts to silence John by sending him to prison.

While in prison John has time to think and to wonder about his life. John has spent his whole life preparing the way for the one who is to come after him; the Messiah. John was convinced that the Messiah had come in this man Jesus. But, here John rots in prison. Where is the promised liberation? What about the promise to set the prisoners free? "Was I wrong in thinking that Jesus was the Messiah," John perhaps muses.

Amid these questions and doubts John reaches out to Jesus and asks; "Are you the One?" Jesus responds by saying; "Look at what I am doing and you decide whether these are the actions of the long-awaited Messiah." We are not told whether this response satisfied John. I often think that when the author of a passage does not indicate how the inquirer responded, it is so that we can put ourselves in the

shoes of the one asking the question. If we had asked John's question, how would we have felt about Jesus' answer?

I see John's struggle in prison a little like the desert that Isaiah talked about. John desperately needed the waters to break forth into his wilderness. He needed streams to flow in the prison of his questions. He needed the desert he was living in to rejoice and blossom. I would like to believe that Jesus' response to his question did in fact turn his sighing into joy and gladness.

From this perspective, our passage becomes an invitation to look at our own lives for a moment. Are we in our own metaphorical prison of questions and doubts? Are we in our own figurative desert? Does our life feel a little like a wilderness right now? Do we need the crocus to again blossom abundantly in our lives? Do we need to hear the Divine Mystery say to us: "Be strong, do not fear?" Do we need to hear the water rushing through our desert and bringing new life?

One of the things I like about Jesus in our passage from Matthew is that he does not condemn John for his doubts or his questions, or his struggles. I hear no judgement. Jesus just encourages John to open his eyes and his heart and see what is going on. “Look around you, John, and you will see that the Holy One is alive and at work all around you.”

Life is full of deserts and prisons. It is part of our reality as human beings. I imagine some of us this morning feel like we are living in our own little desert and we would love for that desert to blossom. It is okay to struggle with questions and doubts. John invites us to be honest with God about them and to be open to the answers that come.

The answers may not necessarily be the answers that we want to hear. If I had been John, I might have crumbled in response to Jesus’ answer; “I am happy for the lepers and the dead, but what about me? I feel dead here in prison. I feel like a leper dying of thirst in this desert. When are you going to rescue me?”

I am not ashamed to admit that I have struggled with a mild form of chronic depression most of my life. At times, it feels like a little like a prison or a desert. Some friends tell me to just snap out of it. They remind me that I have a lot to be grateful for and shouldn't be wallowing in self-pity. I whole heartily agree. Unfortunately, the admonition to just be happy only intensifies the depression. It deepens my sense of shame and it makes me feel even more like a failure because I shouldn't be depressed and I should be grateful for all the abundance in my life.

This fall I have felt the walls of my depression close in on me a little more than usual. As of late, my life has felt a little more like a desert. I have been honest about this with God in prayer. Now, I can't say I have heard God say to me: "Don't worry, I will take care of it."

Last week, however, I did hear a faint whisper. On Sunday, as many of you crowded into my little house in Westfort, I felt warmly welcomed and embraced by your love. It felt good. Thank you. As sat

in my living room later that night in the warm glow of my Christmas lights, I felt a crocus beginning to blossom in my desert. The other night at choir as we sang, laughed and argued about some deep questions, I felt the trickle of a little river of joy welling up inside of me.

I tell this story today not because I want some sympathy, but because I want us to know that we are loved by God and that God wants us to know that truth both intellectually and experientially. God want us to feel that love deep down inside us. God wants our desert to bloom and God wants us to know joy. God comes to us in our prisons and in our deserts and walks with us, if we are willing to let God meet us there. The whole point of the story we are preparing ourselves to hear once again, is that God became one of us in order that we would know that we are loved and that God is with us in the sometimes-messy stables of our lives. **Amen.**