

Flowers in the Desert

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Rev. Anne Fisher
December 15, 2019; Isaiah 35:1-10

This past Tuesday was our service of Shadows and light. It was a lovely service for all who carry burdens this season or who simply want a quiet time for reflection. Mary read the same Isaiah passage that we will read today. It is filled with contrast of desert and bareness and yet if you look hard enough there is beauty and blossoms that could bear fruit. This reading is from the beauty of Isaiah. These words are ones that can quench the parched lips of the desolate. Words of hope from **Isaiah 35:1-10**:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
This is the Word of the Lord.

This is the season for stories -- the type of stories that produce warmth and glow in our hearts. I guess stories are good anytime, but around this time of year, we seem to yearn for more stories. Simply look at how popular the Hallmark Channel is this time of year! And if you stay for the 10:45 service, you will hear the story of Jesus' birth and the story resplendent with angel messengers and sleepy innkeepers, lowly shepherds and wise kings. All the characters that fill our nativity sets help us remember the story that we never tire of hearing.

This is the seasons of our own stories. Memories of Christmases past; remembering our children when they experienced the glow of the tree and the wonder of Christmas for the first time. Remembering our own childhood. I will never forget on my 10th Christmas, my father gingerly holding a box and saying let's get started while we were settling in with our hot chocolate and coffee. The first present of the day going to me and when I opened it out popped the fuzziest little kitten; who ended up having the rottenest disposition but that mattered little, it was the joy and surprise that my most heartfelt wish came true, a kitten.

Sometimes in our memories, there is a yearning to go back to the Christmases of our childhood when wishes could be easily granted. And the world seemed so innocent and hopeful. We grow up and we find ourselves in places where mending broken hearts and bringing back loved ones is not as easy as producing a kitten in a box. Our lives become more complicated and our wants harder to achieve. Along with our stories of dreams come true, we also have stories of loss, disappointment and grief.

These stories are more difficult to recount. These are stories we sometimes do not want to tell and we would rather fill our minds with the happy and light-hearted memories, trying to forget about the darker more barren stories. Being human, being created in God's own image, we run the range of emotions and we experience a range of events that produce joy and sorrow. Our life travels through the deserts and wastelands, where finding the surprise and the promise and the faith to continue is a challenge.

It is the desert stories that I want to share this morning. Not because I want to take away the joy of the season. It is in the deserts in our lives that we are able to find the depth of joy. When the flowers bloom in the barren wasteland of the desert, the beauty is beyond compare.

My first story is set in the Illinois farmland. Now Illinoisans do not think that they live in a desert wasteland. They claim to have the most fertile land this side of Siberia! With all its vibrancy and fertility, row after row of soybeans and corn can be monotonous. One morning, I woke up dreading the long, boring drive through central Illinois from Springfield to Peoria, for the purpose of going to a long boring meeting for presbytery. However, that was not the case. What made this ride memorable was that I traveled with a friend who lives for the out of doors. What I thought was going to be a ride through flat farmland turned into a wildlife adventure. That morning we saw deer, geese, turkey and pheasant. All those things I would have missed had I been on my own. I had dismissed my surroundings as uninteresting and unimportant. My friend taught me it is about perspective. It even helped me with the long meeting that day, as I found moments of grace where I would have previously dismissed as unimportant. Our deserts can be as simple as an uninteresting drive and meeting at the other end and the surprise we find in the ordinary which adds color and life to an otherwise predictable day. I suppose it is all in how you look at it.

My second story is more personal and involves the death of my mother-in-law, Dorothy Dana. Dorothy was a lovely lady who lived out the role of pastor's wife with conviction and grace. She had been a widow for about 18 months and on her second Christmas alone decided to make the trip across the country from Ohio to Idaho to visit her daughter, Margi. Not one to fly, Dorothy chose to take the train. Dorothy loved riding the train but was anxious about traveling alone. In December, she took the train from Ohio to Idaho. Everything went well going out and she had a wonderful time. When she was returning from her visit in early January, her train, The Empire Builder, was delayed by snow. She came into Union station in Chicago. As a result, she missed her train back to Ohio. As she went to the phone to call her

sister in Ohio, she collapsed. We later found out she had an aneurysm and died on the spot. In the confusion, her purse was taken so she did not have any identity. And no one in the family knew where she was. For twelve hours, this lovely, dignified lady was a Jane Doe in a Chicago morgue. Later, Margi retraced her mother's steps to piece together what had happened. One of the stops was with the head resident in the emergency room where they took Dorothy, after she had collapsed. This physician remembered Dorothy on that January night. He had no idea who she was since she did not have any identification. This doctor unbeknownst of Dorothy's life as a faithful and faith-filled woman, added that he had said a prayer for her.

In the desert of sorrow and grief, knowing that the last hands who touched her were compassionate and faith filled hands, meant so much to my family. For a woman who had lived all her life surrounded by people who knew her and loved her and by her community of faith, but had died in the midst of strangers where no one knew her was less terrifying knowing that a total stranger was really part of that loving community. That was a gift more than we could have ever asked for.

When Margi met the doctor to thank him, the physician said that in all his years working in the emergency room, my sister-in-law was the second family member of a patient who made an effort to come and talk to him. The other family came to yell at him and complain! Margi took him and his wife to dinner to thank him! In the desert of sickness and death and no connection with patients, this physician experiences a flower blooming in the desert as well.

My third story is about a close friend of ours for whom I asked for prayers from this congregation. When we had our family celebration at the end of summer for our daughter's wedding, dear friends came from our last home in Chicago. They had just had their first grandson Braydon and were so very excited. Pictures were passed around. Three days later our friends wrote to us to say: "Hello dear friend, I have some heartbreaking news about my new grandson, Brayden. He was diagnosed with a rare brain condition called

Lissencephaly. There is no cure or treatment and the prognosis is not good. Please pray for Sarah, Matt and Brayden as they struggle with what this means. We are all devastated.”

Of course I immediately googled it. Under the most severe cases, although he can live up to about 10 years old, he will not progress mentally past 6 months. This perfectly beautiful little baby will remain trapped in infancy while his body will grow. What terrible shock. After sharing this with you all my very new family of faith, one of you came to me with helpful advice. She said that my friends will discover, even in their grief of what could have been, a depth of love that they would not think possible. I wrote to my friend these words; she has told me that she reads them regularly. They are discovering the capacity of love is not dependent in his progress but simply in him.

Disappointments happen. Elections divide us. There are many things to make us believe we are in the desert feeling alone and barren. But perhaps it is all in how you look at it. Our divided country spurs us on in how we can bridge that divide and make compassion a priority. The beauty of the season transcends our feeling of being alone as we sing our carols. Rejoice! Rejoice! We are not singing it alone but together in one voice, one chorus. These are flowers blooming and moments of grace in an imperfect world. Some moments take us by surprise, some we may fail to recognize, I suppose it is all in how we look at it. I count them as gifts from God.

Christ was born into a country dominated by a foreign power. He came to parents not destined for the good life but knew their lot was to survive. Jesus' life was not filled with lush and varied opportunities but had the potential of being a wasteland and desert -- yet God chose to send his Son to bloom in the desert. The wellspring of our joy rises up from a perfect God who chose to enter a far from perfect world.

Some of our stories are not yet complete. Some of us may be in the desert and have yet to see the flowers bloom. For some, this season is difficult and all they see is the darkness of their past and present. For others, they go through

the motions and try to create joy but find it elusive. It is in those times that we put one foot in front of the other and move forward in faith. Knowing even in the most difficult times, God is with us. And we continue on looking attentive as our story unfolds keeping in mind the words from Isaiah, “and the people shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall be no more.” I suppose it’s all in how you look at it.

Amen