

THE GLORY OF LEBANON

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Isaiah 35:1-7

Today is the Third Sunday of the season of Advent. The four weeks of Advent mark the beginning of the Christian Year. Advent is weird because in this season we are called to prepare ourselves for the birth of a child—a birth that took place twenty centuries ago. Sometimes Advent seems like a month-long baby shower.

We commonly describe Christmas as being the celebration of the birth of Jesus but it is much more than that. Christmas is the celebration that God did something remarkable, something completely without precedent, something that changed the world. God came to us.

Since the time of creation, there is no doubt that God loves us. The scriptures witness to this over and over. But also from the beginning, there has been the ongoing problem of people sinning and turning away from God. For some reason, God would forgive us. But this system wasn't working and so to break the cycle of sin and restoration, God intervened directly and came to us—not as God but as a human named Jesus. We know the Jesus story because we've just spent the past year studying it. Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Holy one of God; Jesus is God. Emmanuel—God with us!

Advent is weird because we spend it preparing for a birth that has already taken place. Each year we act as if we are approaching the first Christmas ever. But it is not the first Christmas. Christmas is a time to celebrate the miraculous event that God loves us. Advent is the time for us to prepare ourselves not for the fact that God is coming into the world but that God is in the world already. How do we meet God?

Advent is on season on a calendar crowded with special times. Take, for example, Veterans Day. This is one day that we are called to remember the sacrifices of those who have served in the armed forces. But Veteran's Day is not the only day we should remember these servicemen and women. Veterans Day should be an annual booster shot to push every day to recognize and appreciate the service of our veterans.

A lesser-known day would be the National Bill of Rights Day which comes up this week on December 15 as designated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1941—a day to celebrate those ten amendments to our constitution.

November is Lung Cancer Awareness Month.

March is my favorite—National Caffeine Awareness Month.

I don't have to remind you librarians that yesterday, December 10, was the Dewey Decimal System Day in honor of the birth of Melvil Dewey in 1851. Many people credit Dewey with inventing the system of book classification that we still use today. That is not correct. What Dewey created was the little white stickers that go on book spines where those numbers can be written. (I made that up. He did invent the Dewey Decimal system.)

We have these special days and weeks and months to remind us of that which is important. Advent is one of these times. It is a time of preparation for the celebration of God coming into the world. Advent is a point on our calendar to remind us that every day we should prepare ourselves for God in our lives.

We do this through prayer and study, through the disciplines of giving and service. We have tools for this such as advent candles and advent calendars. Advent is training for a race that we should run every day of the year.

In Advent, we dig into the scriptures—the accounts of Jesus' birth and life and even his death, as well as his teachings. We also look at the words of the OT because, as Jesus explained, he is the fulfillment of that scripture. In the OT, we find the promises of God for the salvation of his people. This year, for Advent, we are looking at several prophesies from the book of Isaiah. Last week, we looked at Isaiah's prophecy of God's kingdom, led by one who would rule with wisdom and compassion and justice, one who would keep God at the center of all things.

Today's reading offers us another prophecy of the gift of God. Unlike last week, the occasion for this passage is unknown. Last week, Isaiah was addressing the impending invasion by the Assyrian army. We can't put a time or place or occasion with today's reading. None-the-less, it is a beautiful and powerful poem that reveals God's power to bring about the salvation of his people.

The poem is set in the wilderness—not a wooded wilderness but a desert wilderness. As you know, the wilderness was a powerful image for the Jews. Wilderness represented their escape from Egypt, their isolation, their journey with God. They nearly died in the wilderness but God brought them water and food. It was in the wilderness that God gave them the Law. The journey through the wilderness ended with salvation in the promised land. The wilderness is a harsh, unforgiving environment. It is possible to live there, but just barely. In the wilderness, one exists at the very edge. It was no coincidence that Jesus was tested by the devil in the wilderness.

Isaiah tells us that with God the wilderness of our lives will be transformed. No longer will it be hot and dry and lifeless. With God, the desert will *blossom abundantly*. The desert shall become like the land of Lebanon renowned for its great forests and flowing streams. Those who are spiritually dry, who are spiritually

dead, shall witness the *glory* and *majesty* of God. In God they will discover abundant life.

Isaiah talks about people with physical infirmities. But this is poetry, so this includes spiritual infirmities as well. Those with weak hands will be strengthened. Those with feeble knees will be made steady. The eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy. And then there are the words directed at those whose hearts are paralyzed with fear. *Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.* What I like about this is that this God is powerful. Honestly, this God is more powerful than whatever it is we might find frightening. *God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.* God will bring salvation.

In this harsh land, *the waters shall break forth* and the desert shall be filled with streams.

We all experience these wilderness times—times when we feel weak or oppressed, when we feel that our voice is not being heard. We may be physically blind or spiritually blind.

This week, the Edington family has been in such a wilderness. My cousin, PJ, died this week after an exceptionally long fight with cancer. And fight she did. For years she studied her illness and pushed her doctors to get her into trials. She took experimental drugs. She committed herself to special diets. She continued to work. She and her husband traveled. She got her kids through college. For others facing cancer, PJ was the go-to for information and inspiration. She was an example for all of us. Finally, however, this past month, the cancer won and her body gave out and she died. Our extended family is heartbroken. We've been expecting this for so long but PJ had been such a symbol of strength for us all that it is hard to believe that she is gone. We are going to miss her.

It is times like this that the words of Isaiah are appropriate. They remind us that God wants nothing more than to transform our burning deserts into refreshing pools of living water.