

“Finding Joy in the Wilderness”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent III – December 11, 2016

Isaiah 35: 1-10

How many of you have a Christmas cactus in your home? There are lots of us who enjoy these plants throughout the year, but especially at this time of the year. I remember either my grandmother or my great aunt having a huge Christmas cactus in their home, and I think my mom now has a sprig from that plant in her house. Dan and Linda Bourne shared with me this week that there are two varieties of Christmas cacti: one is a Christmas cactus that blooms in December, the other is a Holiday cactus, that blooms in November.

Margaret Wilson gave us many of these plants several years ago, and maybe you’ve seen them in the church office on Kim’s desk. They stay green all through the year, but then, in November or December, these beautiful red blooms pop out on the ends of the branches. I am grateful to Kim and Kelly Gillespie for watering and tending to these plants every week. Because I know that if they were left in my care, they wouldn’t have lasted this long!

Every time I read Isaiah 35, I cannot help but think of the Christmas cactus. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly” (35:1-2). Perhaps it is because it is a “cactus” plant, and it literally blossoms. Or perhaps it is because for eleven months of the year, the plant appears the same, no changes to its exterior. And then, in a time that coincides with Advent, it bursts into color, showing forth newness and joy.

A cactus blossoming. The burning desert becoming a pool of water. The blind seeing. The lame leaping like a deer. Joy in the midst of barrenness and hopelessness.

This passage from Isaiah is full of oxymorons, phrases that seem to contradict each other. But in many respects, that is what Advent is all about: believing and trusting in God’s promise of joy in the midst of darkness and despair.

Isaiah is speaking to a people who are full of hopelessness. They have been taken away from their homeland, the center of their worship – the temple in Jerusalem – has been destroyed, and they have hardly a reason to believe that God is still with them. They would have likely experienced hardship and despair as they were taken away on a desert road to Babylon, not unlike the experience of Native Americans in our country on the Trail of Tears. The lens through which the Israelites viewed the world would have made things seem barren, isolating, and threatening.

The prophet takes that lens and refocuses his people’s vision toward hope and joy. The people’s wilderness will be full of joy and singing; they will once again experience the majesty and splendor of their homeland like

Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon (35:2). The blind will see all of God's splendor, the deaf will hear all of God's joy, the lame will dance in all of God's majesty, the mute will sing of God's glory (35:5-6). Creation will be transformed by God's might and power, turning the desert into a place of life, and keeping all those who threaten God's people – the jackals, lions and ravenous beasts – far, far away (35:7,9).

And the road of exile will now be a highway back to God, a Holy Way for the redeemed. It will be a road filled with dancing and joy, not tears and pain. It will be for God's people, and no one – not even fools – will wander or get lost (35:8). For it will be on this highway that God's people will return to Zion, obtaining joy and gladness, with sorrow and sighing fleeing away (35:10).

Many of us are traveling on wilderness roads. I asked the Bible Study on Tuesday what modern-day wildernesses we experience today. We thought of physical places or locations, such as decaying urban neighborhoods, or isolated rural areas. We thought of life situations we go through, such as young adults going through high school and/or college, or people entering the military. We thought of emotional challenges we experience, such as addiction, physical or mental illness, grief, or depression. We thought of others who are literally wandering in wildernesses in our world, such as refugees, the poor, and the homeless. We thought of those who are spiritually wandering, disconnected from God, thirsting for relief, but not sure where to turn in the midst of their desert.

Maybe you identify with one of those wilderness experiences. Maybe someone you love is wandering on one of those wilderness roads. Maybe it is hard for you this Advent to let yourself trust that joy can happen, that hope can come, that the cactus will finally bloom. Maybe you find yourself in the desert, and it is hard for you to believe, to truly believe, that God will save you. Or that you are worth saving.

One of my best friends in ministry is Matt Rich, and he is a Presbyterian pastor in Augusta, Georgia. He wrote the following reflection in The Presbyterian Outlook on the Advent Season, and I shared it with the Bible Study group on Tuesday. I invite you to hear his words now, and that they might speak to you as powerfully as they spoke to me this week. Matt writes:

They shall name him Emmanuel – which means “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). The high and lofty one who inhabits eternity becomes God with flesh. God we can understand. God we can cling to when the night is long and our fears crowd in. God who can comfort us. God who can hear us. God who understands us. God who shares the skin we are in.

Could it really be true? God is with us? Because if that is true, if Emmanuel is really true, then the skin we wear becomes immensely valuable. We might even say the flesh we are in becomes holy. Yes, it might even be worth saving.

In Matthew 1:18-25, verses we read often this time of year, the Messiah gets two names. Before the Messiah is called Emmanuel, we learn his parents

are to name him Jesus “because he will save his people from their sins.” God is with us to save us. God did not come to be with us to punish us, to trick us, to string us along, to get us to do all kinds of funny tricks for him. No, from Eden to the New Jerusalem, God is with us to save us.

God is with you because you are worth saving.

If you are a teenage girl visited by an angel with news that you will bear a child, you are worth saving.

If you are a carpenter trying to do everything by the book when you receive unexpected news, you are worth saving.

If you are a no-name shepherd watching sheep in the middle of the night, you are worth saving.

If you are a scholar of a strange religion in a foreign land who sees a star in the sky, you are worth saving.

If you are a parent unsure what to do with a child who exasperates you every day, you are worth saving.

If you are a teenager struggling with your body and the images you see on magazine covers, you are worth saving.

If you are a college student home for Christmas break, terrified of the police because of the color of your skin, you are worth saving.

If you have sworn to serve and protect your community but fear even your best intentions will enrage friends and neighbors, you are worth saving.

If you are convinced that nothing positive can come from the recent election, you are worth saving.

If you are facing Christmas for the first time without the love of your life, you are worth saving.

If you are an elder praying for a Christmas miracle to keep the church lights on . . .

If you are an emotionally drained pastor who longs for Christmas to be over . . .

If you are . . .

If I am me . . .

No matter what skin we wear, God is with us because we are worth saving.

And your neighbor too . . . (“You Are Worth Saving,” Matthew A. Rich, The Presbyterian Outlook, December 5, 2016, 20).

God is coming – God is with us – because we are worth saving. So strengthen your weak hands and make firm your weak knees. Do not be afraid. For here is your God – Emmanuel, God with us. And on your wilderness road, know that God will find you and bring you joy.

“The wilderness and dry land shall be glad . . . like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.