

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.

Advent Wilderness – Bethlehem Highway

Imagine a desert and Isaiah standing at the edge of the desert. Everywhere Isaiah looks there is sand – sand – sand! There are no streams or rivers – no lakes. There are no beautiful flowers or green plants. There is no laughter and no joy – just lots and lots of sand.

In this wilderness Isaiah has a special message of hope.

When God comes to save, no one gets left behind. In Isaiah, the barren places of creation gush with the waters of new life. Mary rejoices in God, who lifts up the vulnerable. John's wondering of "are you the one?" finds an answer in a litany of Jesus' saving actions. Where there appears to be no way forward, God makes a road – a **Bethlehem Highway**.

Throughout Advent words, of preparation for *God with us* come from the prophet Isaiah. All of these texts of **Advent Wilderness** are from the first half of Isaiah. In general, these passages and oracles tend to be set in the time before Israel's exile. Many take the form of warnings calling for Judah's returning to God lest judgment fall. The threat of the Assyrians in the last decades of the eighth century BCE made this judgment seem very real to the Israelites.

Today's text however is likely from the time of Judah's exile in Babylon. The people were in captivity. Their capital city incinerated. Their religious temple destroyed.

Their sons killed and their king blinded by the enemy. The people were feeling burnt and brown and broken. For the exiles, hundreds of miles of rugged wilderness terrain stood between them and their homeland. The difficult landscape was made even more threatening by its scarcity of water. An attempted return would be life-threatening even for the fittest, much less those weakened by age or illness. Life had become like a desert to the people. Life for the exiles had become brown and burned out, dead and dry, with blowing sand.

Life can be that way as many of you so well know – like a desert where days are dried up, burnt and brown. After the death of a husband or wife or child or dearest friend life can shrivel and crack. Sometimes the love between spouses slowly withers and their marriage becomes like a desert. During a prolonged illness life can be the burning sand that Isaiah describes.

When a person loses a job, loses income and doesn't know where to turn because there seems to be nowhere to turn. In periods of loneliness and depression, when the walls talk back to you and you have lost your energy and life has lost its challenge – that is wilderness, bleak and barren.

Did you know that Christmas time is the worst time of year for people who feel that life is like a desert? Many people dread this season and are praying for it to be over. These desert people wilt under Christmas pressures to be happy. Christmas is the number one time of the year for depression and suicide. For many, life is a barren wilderness, and life seems even more deserted at this time of year.

Life can be like a desert for each one of us. When love tragically dries up and God seems so very far away. Somewhere along in your life and mine, life will be a desert. Inevitably, sometime, somewhere, someplace, each of us will walk a desert path – a wilderness barren and bleak.

Isaiah speaks not a warning but a promise to the exiles – to us. Several different words are used to describe the land in Isaiah's vision: *wilderness, dry land, desert, burning sand* and *thirsty ground*. It is as though the prophet sought to cover every possible terrain that might be encountered. And always, a way is provided through those lands. The image of direction is offered in the *highway* – the safe and holy path. And water? Hear the expressions for water employed by Isaiah to emphasize how God will provide water's life-giving and life-sustaining gift: *waters, streams, a pool, a swamp, and springs* – lots and lots of water!

A straight and well-watered way still represents a long and potentially dangerous trek, yet none will be left behind. "Here is your God," says Isaiah, "your God will come." Fear may be set aside, not because obstacles no longer remain, but because God comes to save.

Isaiah's promise gave the Israelites living in the Babylonian exile – gives us – something to rejoice about. Advent is a time to prepare for the One who comes to strengthen us in our weakness, to provide us with all that we need to sustain us on our journey, and to walk with us through the wilderness.

The kingdom of God is characterized by joy. This is the joy that sustains us in a world where things are not right. The world may not yet understand or embrace the

coming of the Lord, but we who have welcomed the kingdom of God by faith know that the Lord's kingdom will finally come.

Our reading from Isaiah points to an amazing joy. In the midst of the desert, where nothing can grow and life is lived in the extreme, God comes with blessing and the desert is transformed. Today our wilderness comes as anxiety, insecurity and fear. Sometimes it is family or health or just plain staring life in the face and coming up wondering if anything makes sense.

In this wilderness we hear Isaiah's vision and must decide if we simply believe **in** God or if we truly **believe** God! Believe what God says – what God promises, "I will never leave you or forsake you!"

Today is the Sunday of Joy – the joy of God. Tonight at our "Blue Christmas" Service we offer a time of reflection and meditation for those feeling a little lost in the wilderness. So often, our Christmas preparations leave us feeling exhausted. We can feel drained – that our burdens are suddenly too heavy. Tonight we are invited to rest into the silences and to participate in the singing and candle lighting as a way to celebrate God's joy in **Advent Wilderness** as we journey toward Bethlehem.

Joy is not something that we can seek; it is something that will overtake us on the journey while we are working to keep the vision alive and walking on the path that Jesus has set before us – the **Bethlehem Highway**.

As we walk that path – joy happens to us. We gain glimpses of what it is that God is about – we encounter situations where we see God's promises coming true, and we have, suddenly, this great joy in hearts.

Joy should not be confused with happiness, which many avidly pursue through various avenues. Joy is not happiness – nor even contentment. Joy is overwhelming; it is what happens when we witness God at work, whether it is in our family relationships, in our church, or in our community and in the wider world.

While it cannot be sought, the gift of joy can be given and received by each one of us. When we see the works of God being done we receive the gift of joy and when we allow God to work through us we give the gift of joy or at the very least – its possibility.

Joy is a wonderful thing – it overtakes us when we are on the path shown to us by Christ. It pops up whenever we see God at work healing the sick, curing the lame, giving sight to the blind, and proclaiming good news to those who are poor. It pops up when we do the work of God – when we understand that God is doing this work in the circumstances around us.

Everlasting joy comes in the midst of the desert – just before the dawn. **Amen.**