

## **Comfort, Comfort my People**

Isaiah 35:1-10

Luke 1: 46-55

Dec 11, 2022

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### *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.

### *Luke 1: 46-55*

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

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As we sing our way through Advent and Christmas our lyrics place us in bleak midwinter where the frosty wind moans, where earth stands hard as iron and water like a stone. It's cold and snowy for our sleigh rides with jingling bells. We rock around the Christmas tree and we roast chestnuts over an open fire. And if we have no place to go, we can let it snow without any sign of stopping.

This is our Advent and Christmas northern climate experience so it takes some imagination and spiritual muscle to consider where the story really does take place. Advent begins in the desert and it ends there too. From the cry of the prophet Isaiah in his people's exile in the dry and barren desert wilderness to the birth of the Christ child in a Bethlehem stable, the story of Christmas is a desert story despite our lyrical images.

It is a literal desert story, where life can be challenging because of the harsh climatic conditions, and the scarcity for the basic human needs of water and food that can make survival quite difficult. Deserts are known in general for their hostile heat, but in the Israel desert the winters are also bitterly cold. Deserts are truly a place of desolation, of emptiness. It is such a place from where our ancient faith ancestors cried and prayed and waited for the Messiah, for the One who would comfort them, who would save them.

Jesus was born in a *literal* desert place.

Jesus was also born in a *symbolic* desert place under Roman rule and oppression, and into a world that had waited hundreds of years for him.

Over those hundreds of years prophets had cajoled and admonished the people, and they had also offered their visions and God's plans of redemption, ransom and comfort. Isaiah foresaw the future when all the barrenness was instead lush and green, when dry creek beds were flowing streams, when dry, brittle brush would blossom with abundant new life. The comfort and healing of the created world would carry over to the people, to God's beloved humanity. Those once lame would walk, leap and dance, the deaf would hear even the whispers of loved ones, the blind would see life in all of its vibrant beauty. Old, arthritic hands and knees would again know the health and energy of youth, the fearful would know calm and peace, and the exiled would again call Zion, Jerusalem, home. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

In the symbolic desert place and time of Jesus' birth—which scholars calculate to be around 4 BCE—it was an unforgiving and daunting period for the Jewish people as they endured brutal oppression, frequent violence, a heavy tax burden, many corrupt religious leaders as well as Roman imperialism led by a ruthless military commander named Herod the Great. Just to survive, just to take care of their family, a great personal ethical dilemma for the Jews often was needing to choose between collaborating with or resisting the Romans. The people, seemingly more than ever, needed a messiah, they needed hope, they needed comfort.

The Jewish people believed, knew, that the only way to overcome the imposing power of Rome was through God's intervention, through the long awaited Messiah, the Savior, the Redeemer. Mary and Elizabeth, like all the Jews, anticipated God's intervention for all who struggled under Roman domination.

Bursting into the long waiting for the desert to rejoice and blossom and sing of the glory of the Lord, was the revelation to Mary that she, a young, engaged woman living in the small desert village of Nazareth, was the one chosen to be the mother of the One who would comfort, ransom and save the people of God. God came to the desert, to the literal desert, to the emotional desert, to come into the world as one of us. God came into the emptiness, the barrenness, the harsh landscape to bring comfort to a hurting world and a broken people.

Mary's response was a moment of savoring the news and rejoicing in God for what this holy news means for her personally—favor upon her servant lowliness and blessings in all generations yet to be—before celebrating and emphasizing God's comforting mercy and strength in broad and sweeping care and grace for the ways some cultures oppress, repress and suppress others rather than living as children of the one Creator—before naming the ways that God through Christ would dismantle the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, would disavow the powerful on their thrones, and disarm those who denied food, homes, care and resources in the name of power, greed and corruption. God's ancient promise was being fulfilled.

Mary's song in the desert was the comforting news generations had waited to hear so that they, that all, will through God have joy upon their heads and obtain joy and gladness, as sorrow

and sighing shall flee away. One of the first things that Mary did once knowing she was to be the mother of Jesus was to comfort others through her words and God's work.

As we live in the Advent paradox of the already and the 'not yet,' we too sing a song in the desert in and among our carols of cold and snow. This season reminds us that we need not fear the desert, not the parched, dried out times of our own lives, nor the perilous wilderness that this world can be sometimes as God's grace, comfort and redemption was born in a desert time and place.

This season also reminds us that God's promise of comfort in our desert places does not mean 'comfortable lives' free from pain, distress, problems or even suffering. What it does mean is that we receive comfort from God when our trust, our hope, are found in God.

It also means that we are called to be comforters in God's name. This is the task of our ministry and of our faith in the already/not yet. As it has been said, "God does not comfort us to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters."<sup>i</sup>

In the dark and oppressive ways that Herod stills walks the world, in the ways that our world needs comfort, in the ways that our lives needs comfort, we are reminded that God is still present, just as God was present that night in Bethlehem when the world was cold and barren. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> British Protestant preacher John Henry Jowett (1864-1923)