
GOD'S UNIMAGINABLE SUPRISES

AN ADVENT RESOURCE FROM GCORR

WEEK 3 - FINDING JOY AFTER THE WILDERNESS

ISAIAH 35:1-10 (NRSV)

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.

SERMON STARTERS

- In our communities and around the world, there are many people around us who are feeling hopelessness and sadness. Perhaps there are those who are feeling this way in our midst. In this text, Isaiah reminds us of the power of God to transform the harshest setting and bring about a joy that is deep and lasting. In a vision, Isaiah saw how God brings life to a place where there is nothingness, and joy where there is hopelessness. The desert was brought to bloom and the wilderness became a paradise. Isaiah saw the power of God to transform — the transformational power to offer hope and the transformational power to bring joy, even when feelings of hopelessness arise. Today

we are reminded that God's power transforms the brokenness of people and reminds us that no matter what we face, we are not alone. Today we are encouraged to await the season of joy that will come. In the midst of our sadness and hopelessness, we are not alone, and God is with us. As people of God, we have faith in the transformational power of God and look forward to the season of joy.

- This passage takes place in the wilderness. The word for 'wilderness' (midbar) points to a place or experience of wandering. The wilderness theme is rich in the Bible. It is often tied in with the notion that a person or group of people is traveling the spiritual path towards sanctification. It may be a physical place, but it has a divine purpose. Have you found yourself wandering through the wilderness? One may encounter new experiences in the journey through the wilderness. There are trials and challenges in this journey. But through it, one confronts his or her fears, grows in faith, and is able to meet God in a more powerful way. Isaiah reminds us that there is divine purpose to our wilderness. During this Advent season do you feel yourself wandering in the wilderness? Consider that God is leading you through a spiritual path. What challenges and fears are you confronting during this time? To where does God lead you through the wilderness?

CHILDREN'S SERMONETTE

THEME: Returning Home

Bible verse: "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." (Isaiah 35:10)

**Note: The word "ransomed" may require some explanation. You could also read it as "The people God has rescued shall return, and come to Zion..."*

Optional Opening Activity: Gather pictures (or slides to display) that feature homes of famous pop-culture characters. Examples include: the batcave, Paw Patrol headquarters, Mister Rogers' Land of Makebelieve, Avengers tower, the Encanto house, and more. Use whatever the children in your context might know best. Then quiz them about what house goes with which character and see what they get right.

Script:

Now I want you to stop and think about your home. Close your eyes and imagine you're coming home after a long trip. What's the longest time you've ever been away from your home? (Pause for answers).

Those are some long trips you've been on! It can feel so good to come home after being gone a long time. That's part of what today's scripture is about. The prophet Isaiah is talking about a time when God's people will come home after being gone for years and years.

The people of Israel were in "exile." That means they were forced to leave their homes and land. In this case, it was because they were defeated by a foreign army. But Isaiah was speaking of a time one day when the people of Israel would be able to go home. That would certainly be a happy time! Imagine if you'd been away from home for years and you finally got to go home to your family and house and stuff!

There are people right now in our world who are in exile. One word to describe them is "refugees." Someone is a refugee when they've had to leave their home or country because it's too dangerous for them to stay there. It could be dangerous because there is a famine and there's not enough food to eat. Or it could be too dangerous because there is a war going on. Even Jesus was a refugee for a while when he was a baby because King Herod was trying to kill him.

We are reading this Scripture from Isaiah during Advent, the time leading up to Christmas, because it reminds us that, even in hard times, there are good things worth looking

forward to. And God is the source of those good things. Those good things could look like returning home after being gone for a long time. Or it could also be learning from Jesus that we have the power to help heal the world by helping people who are refugees.

And as we celebrate this season of Advent and Christmas, I encourage you (and everyone else here and listening) to look for ways you could help those who are away from their homes right now.

That could mean sending a care package to a college student who can't afford to go home for the holidays. Or you might ask your family to donate money to an organization like the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), which cares for refugees around the world. Or you may help plan for this Sunday school class or our church to give food and blankets to people in our community who are homeless. What do you think about those ideas? Do you have others?

**Note: Depending on the setting and time-constraints, you may consider having the group take a vote on one or two ideas and then follow up on those activities to help with follow-through.*

This holiday season, let each of us be moved to do good in the world as Jesus taught us. Let us pray together. You can repeat after me.

Thank you, God,

for giving us what we need.

Help us to share what we have,

with those who don't have enough.

And may we do our part,

to care for our neighbor,

both close to home,

and around the world.

And may we all look forward,

to the day when everyone,

has a home in peace.

Amen.