

December 11, 2016
Third Sunday in Advent

“Salvation Starts From the Desert”

Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-15

I've only been stuck in a desert-type place once in my life. I was on a photo safari in the Serengeti Plain in Africa and one of my group's two vans broke down. It was dry. It was hot. There was no road, much less any buildings or businesses around—no Starbucks. It was just us in the hot sun watching some giraffes eat from some trees and several feet away you could see the sun-bleached skull of a gazelle lying in the dirt. Sounds a bit desperate, doesn't it?

It wasn't. Several folks had some munchies in their backpacks. And I kid you not; one guy pulled out a bottle of 12-year-old scotch and another guy pulled out some Cuban cigars he'd picked up at duty free and the trip over. And the truth of the situation was we had two experienced guides with us and one van still in working order. Things looked kind of desperate, but in reality, we knew we would be fine. That afternoon sipping whiskey and smoking a cigar in the shade of an Acacia tree in East Africa is a very fond memory.

However, the truth is that the metaphorical deserts in which each of us can find ourselves in this sojourn through broken life on fallen earth aren't so pleasant. These deserts are as different as each one of us is unique. These are the deserts and desolate places where there was once hopes and dreams, loves and caring, health and vitality, prosperity and plenty or simply peace and happiness, but now there seems to be barrenness. The dreams are shattered. The relationships are strained and broken. The body is failing. The wallet is empty. The peace and happiness has been replaced by stress and worry. You longed for a life that was a lush garden, but some part of it at least, is a wasted desert.

Or not.

John the Baptist sat in Herod's dungeon. His life, which had been lived in the wilderness, seemed particularly barren now. His life could end any moment. But more than that, the passion that drove him—the proclamation of the coming Messiah—now seemed empty and unsure. Out of this personal desert John sends a message to Jesus, *“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”*

Jesus' response is a very thinly veiled pointing to Isaiah's prophecy in our Old Testament reading today. *“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”*

This prophecy is a telling of the promised salvation of God; the weak hands being strengthened, all ailing being healed. It is a prophecy of restoration and renewal. It is a prophecy of the faithful being brought close to the glory of God and all that is bad, evil and desolate being banished! But it all starts in a desert!

“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.”

I think the message Jesus was sending to John was, “Look what I'm doing! Yes, I know the place where you are seems like a desert now. But look what I'm doing! I'm in the midst of bringing about this great promise of God. Look at what Isaiah wrote! It is happening!”

John's dank cell seemed a desert, and maybe on this side of Christ's second advent it was, but it was the desert where John was called to wait until God would make him rejoice, be glad and see the glory of the Lord.

Whatever your desert may be, it is only a desert waiting to be restored and renewed at the proper time. And that may seem like cold comfort now, but I want you to remember one thing: the desert is not just yours; it's not a place where God was unwilling to go Himself.

The cross was a desert. The holy Son of God hung there, bereft of any blessing of God, forsaken by the Father and under His wrath and rejection. Jesus bore the curse of total desolation, and He did so willingly that you might never, ever have to be in that place, the desert abandoned by God, the true death that is separation from His presence and His blessings.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, please take comfort and hope in knowing that whatever desert of want and pain you might be experiencing this day, it is not that desert, the forsaken by God desert where Jesus went in your place. Whatever you're going through right now, and it may indeed be bad, the promise of God still stands, and stands forever. *"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."*

That's some beautiful and joyful poetry of promise. Remember, it was spoken to God's people when the world was crumbling down around them. Israel had not army or power. Assyria was threatening from the north. The temptation was to, instead of trusting God, to look for rescue from Egypt in the south. God called to Israel through His prophet to believe His promises and endure in faith. St. James does the same to the church after Christ, enduring under persecution, waiting for Jesus to return in Glory bringing the completion of God's plan of salvation.

And thankfully, it's not all waiting. Jesus still comes to us, giving us joy in the desert as we await the desert to break forth in rejoicing. In His Word, in our Holy Baptism, in the bread and the wine Jesus comes to us. In this He reminds us that, no matter how desperate our earthly circumstances, we are not in that desert He endured on the cross, the one forsaken by God.

In these He reminds us that we are forgiven, made holy saints of the most high God and thus this day are citizens of His kingdom. We are in the garden of His delights already, rescued from all of the deserts we endure. In this we can take joy and comfort even in the worst of circumstances.

I really don't want to take a metaphor involving scotch and cigars too far when it comes to our faith. But what we did out there in Africa was to simply take joy where we found it in the circumstance of being stuck in the desert, but in our hearts knowing everything would work out that we would make it back home eventually.

Whatever your desert, no matter how horrible, no matter how painful, even if it is indeed killing you, you have the certain promise of God. Jesus has done the work of securing your reconciliation and restoration. You stand right with God and your future is the desert bursting from death and devastation to life and salvation without end. There is no doubt. *"A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness."*

You have been placed on the road. The road's name is Jesus. He is now and will always bring you through your deserts until they are finally, wonderfully bursting forth with joy. You are the ransomed of the Lord. Despite the deserts of today, you shall come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon your head. You shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Amen.