

# The Time for Blossoming is Now!

Sermon for December 15, 2019  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
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*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom.*

Isaiah 35:1-10

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

Today we observe the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent and we are blessed with the beautiful image of a desert in bloom:

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom. (Isaiah 35:1).*

It so happens that the climate and the landscapes here in California are in many ways similar to the climate and the landscapes in the Holy Land. So, unlike people in many other parts of the world--let's say England or Ireland--we can actually imagine what this looks like, a dessert in bloom. In fact, this past spring there was a super-bloom here in California, so spectacular that it could even be observed from space: A riot of color in yellow and pink and purple and orange and red and gold.

People came from all over with their cameras and i-phones to take pictures for Facebook and Instagram. Park rangers had to work overtime to manage all the traffic. Those people who traveled long distances to see the super-bloom, what did they see? They saw the spectacle of brilliant colors, spread out over valley after valley like a magic carpet.

But those of us who live here year-round, for us, this was much more than a series of valleys in spring time. For us it was almost a miracle. After all, we know what these same hills look like during the rest of the year. We know how dry and brown and dusty those hills can appear in the summer. We know how parched and desolate the landscape can look during a drought. And we know something about the devastation that comes when reservoirs are depleted and wells run dry. (Well, perhaps those of us in the city do not know these things personally; but we still live near enough to the affected areas that we get a strong sense of ravages that the droughts inflict on our region.)

And so, our experience of the super-bloom was heightened by the contrast between the parched summer look of the hills and the lush aliveness when those same hills exploded into bloom.

This same contrast between a parched land and a desert in full bloom is also featured in our first reading today: Isaiah writes:

*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.*  
(Isaiah 35:6-7)

It seems as if Isaiah is also describing a super-bloom! More than that: he speaks of a blossoming that is so profuse and abundant, that the land begins to rejoice and sing! I wonder what that sounds like,- the sound of a desert that sings for joy?

And then, out of this landscape of rocks and sand of rivers and reeds, a second landscape emerges, a landscape of the heart, a spiritual landscape. And in this spiritual landscape we find all the same features as in the landscape of of stone. This spiritual landscape can also be plagued by droughts; this spiritual landscape can also get parched, In the landscape of our hearts there can also be desolation: there can be a drying up of strength and spirit so profound that our hearts become a wilderness of sorrow and despair.

For the people of Israel the desert was a place full of memories, both beautiful and scary: The desert was the way through which they escaped from slavery into freedom, so the desert was a place of liberation. But the desert was also full of enemies who attacked them and wild animals who were deadly. So the desert was a place full of danger. The desert was a place without food or water, so it was a place of deprivation.

But it was also the place where they were fed by manna and given drink from a magic rock, so it was a place full of wonder and miracles. It was a place where they were lost for 40 years, so it was a place of disorientation. But it was also the place where they received the Ten Commandments, and where they built the first ark, and so it was a very holy place.

But by the time of Isaiah, so many terrible things had happened, that the desert was nothing but a place of weariness and dried-up bones. This weariness was so deep, that it even translated into physical symptoms: Isaiah speaks of “weak hands” (verse 3), “feeble knees” (verse 3), “fearful hearts” (verse 4), obscured vision (verse 5), hindered hearing (verse 5), broken bodies (verse 6), and silent tongues (verse 6). There is an overwhelming sense of weariness and fatigue.

And we all know some of this weariness, don't we? Some of us know it first hand, just like some of us know the drought of California first hand, and some have stood by and watched how friends and loved ones have been slayed by this spiritual desert.

In response it has been suggested to me that I organize something called a “Blue Christmas” Service. A “Blue Christmas” Service is a special worship service for people who grieve or go through difficult times. After all, it can be extremely difficult to travel through the land of grief when everyone

else seems to be happy. It can be so hard to cope with depression when all around you the world seems to be embroiled in one big Christmas Party. It can be challenging to come to terms with a new medical situation or to receive a pink slip at work, when people around you seem strong and busy. It can be a lonely feeling when families get together and you don't have a family.

And so, there is much value in organizing such a so-called "Blue Christmas" Service where pain can be acknowledged and where there is room for grief and lament. And I thought carefully whether we need such a service here at St. Francis, because I know of several people who are having a very hard time right now.

But then I decided against it. I decided against it because we are the church together: We cannot be two churches, one for the joyful and one for those who grieve. We are the church together and we are meant to support each other in good times and in difficult times.

And so we have to figure out together how to be there for each other, and to make room for all the different emotions that each one brings through the door. We are meant to be there for each other, and strengthen each other, in sorrow and in celebration. And if we have not yet succeeded in doing this, if I as a pastor have not succeeded in helping you to create such a space, then the answer for me is not to create a separate "Blue Christmas" Service for those who are troubled but to find a way of supporting each other in every service. My answer is to ask all of you for help to make worship and congregational life a place where all feelings are welcome and honored and where all spiritual landscapes are acknowledged and respected.

At the same time, there must be a time of blossoming, a time for celebration, a time for the super-bloom. And that time is now. It is precisely in the midst of all that is troublesome that we are called to bloom. Not when all the problems are solved not when all the wounds are healed, as if such a thing can ever really happen, but in the midst of whatever is going on we are called to bloom.

After all, the beautiful poem in our first reading was written during one of the darkest times of Israel, when all hope seemed lost, when people were sinking into deep despair. In the middle of the desolation of their spirits, Isaiah painted for them the vision of a blooming desert. When they were dry like a drought-stricken desert he conjured up for them a blooming landscape. When their hearts were so heavy that they could no longer sing, he told how nature itself will burst into song. And when they felt they couldn't go on, he urged them to support each other:

*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." (Isaiah 35:4)*

Today is the third Sunday in Advent, and the third Sunday is often called the "Joy" Sunday. In some tradition there is even a different colored candle, a pink candle, in the advent wreath, in recognition of this special joy Sunday. And yet, on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent, the world is still the

same world with all its brokenness and pain, and so it is precisely in the midst of this pain that we must hold on to joy. It is precisely in the midst of whatever is happening that we must say to each other: Here is your God!

And how can we do that? I think it begins by first discovering some blooming for ourselves, some glimmer of hope, some stubborn hope that springs up here and there, little sparks of hope which are really all around us, if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear. And when we discover such a spark, we must hold on to it for dear life and then we share it and by sharing it it becomes bigger and bigger until at last we notice God at work all around us.

My wife had a difficult day on Friday, and ended up very stressed out. So she decided to take a little break and decorate the outside of our house with Christmas lights, which is something she loves to do.

It was cold and dark and drizzly and quite miserable outside, but still she climbed on our flat roof to install a huge blinking star-shaped contraption, which she has created for that purpose. Suddenly she came rushing down and burst into our living room, excited like a little child. All the weariness of the day had evaporated.

*You won't believe what just happened, it was the sweetest thing!* And then she told how it was getting dark, and how she had trouble with the star, but still she managed to get it installed, and plug it in, and the moment it lit up there was a little voice, singing loud and clear: Jingle Bells! Jingle Bells! It came from the sidewalk across the street, from a small child in a stroller, singing in the rain, because of the star, Jingle Bells! Jingle Bells!

Yep, I thought to myself, I know this child, it is the prophet Isaiah: singing because of the star, singing in the dark and in the rain, singing about the light, singing about the blooms in the desert, singing about the courage of people, even when they are scared, singing about peace in the midst of war, about wolves lying with lambs, singing about the love of God for a broken world: singing about the God who has come into the world through Jesus and who is here now, standing among us.

*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).*

Amen.