

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 And Mary said, "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."

Sermon: ATWT

Normally I don't like to draw too heavily on pop culture for sermons or programs – imagine Christmas Pageant - Hoarders edition – do you want to know the real reason why there was no room for Mary and Joseph at that inn? That innkeeper needed an inn-tervention. Accept this gift of help we offer.

If you have no idea what I am talking about, count your blessings, because sometimes these cultural references are like burrs that get stuck in the wooly stuff of the mind – you just can't get rid of them. That's what happened when I was thinking about my sermon title for this week – I actually had in mind a gracious poem that someone sent me years ago about the inevitable flow of change in life, but what came to mind was ATWT – which for fans is a shorthand reference to the long running soap opera

As the World Turns. Not that I even followed As The World Turn – we were more Days of Our Lives people – but that name still managed to work its way into my psyche.

But occasionally good things stick in my mind, like this verse that came in a Christmas card and immediately earned a spot tacked to the office bulletin board in Vermont. From there we used it on many occasions and even as a benediction for worship

Everything changes, the wheel

of life turns without pause.

After the rain, good weather.

In the wink of an eye

The universe throws off

its muddy cloths.

For ten thousand miles

the landscape

Spreads out like

a beautiful brocade.

Gentle sunshine.

Light breezes. Smiling flowers,

Hang in the trees, amongst the

sparkling leaves,

All the birds sing at once.

Men and animals rise up reborn.

What could be more natural?

After sorrow comes happiness.

Although not specifically Christian, this message of transformation from sorrow to happiness does seem suited to the season of Christmas, especially during the four weeks of advent when we go back in our readings to the prophets who spoke words of hope and comfort to people in dark and difficult times. When Isaiah says: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom," he is addressing an audience that is in the wilderness – a nation that is abiding in a dry land.

And unlike a television drama, where issues are often resolved in an episode, or at least in a season, the dark days of Israel's exile continued for the life of an entire generation. The people who left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness under Moses had come into their promised land and built a great nation. About a thousand years before Jesus was born King David established Jerusalem as his capital and Solomon builds the temple there. But under successive and increasingly corrupt leaders the nation totters and falls.

About 600 years before Jesus was born Jerusalem is conquered, the temple destroyed and the first Jews deported to Babylon, now Iraq. It wasn't until 80 years later that Jews returned to Jerusalem and built a second temple. This was after the Persians, now Iran, conquered the Babylonian Empire.

Then, about 200 years later, Alexander the Great comes along and conquers the Persians. Alexander doesn't really worry about the religion of the Jews, but his later political heirs were not so tolerant. Jewish religious rites were banned and a statue of Zeus was put in the temple - everyone was ordered to worship Zeus and make pagan sacrifices in the Jewish holy place. This leads to a rebellion under the Maccabees, who win back the temple and rededicate it to their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This event is what is commemorated in Hanukkah.

Now, as the world turns, about 100 years before Jesus is born the Romans conquer the lands of the Middle East, including Israel. Talks about a soap opera, the Romans are so busy fighting each other they hardly have time to rule their new subjects. Richard Burton is down in Egypt cavorting with Elizabeth Taylor – so they install a puppet government over the people of Israel with a very narrow focus – taxes and tranquility. Herod becomes King and consolidates his power through murder and military repression.

The people in Israel are once again in a wilderness, once again in a dry land. There is no righteousness among the powerful; there is no justice for the poor. The priests use their position for their own gain; the commandments of God are reduced to meaningless rites and rituals. Will the promises that the prophets made some six hundred years before still be remembered by God?

Sorry for the historical detour, but this flow of events, this tale of liberation, establishment, exile, recovery and repression is the background of Mary's song, the dark night where she is given a glimpse of the dawn:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 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."

Today we mostly receive the message of the season in the context of our personal lives rather than the fortunes of nations. Christmas is a family holiday, so the trials and troubles of political power struggles are set aside for a time and values of home and hearth are embraced.

From every side we hear a holiday message of joy and good cheer, but as we all know even with the personal world of our own families there are many moods of Christmas –

There is the lonely Christmas and the Uncle Billy had too much to drink I wish everyone would get out of here Christmas.

There is the vacation time Christmas and the over time Christmas.

The car in the driveway with bow on it Christmas and the lay away Christmas.

The I'll be home for Christmas Christmas and the third deployment in Afghanistan Christmas.

There is the new baby Christmas and the mom's in the nursing home Christmas; the family reunion Christmas and the funeral Christmas; the heartwarming Christmas and heartbreaking Christmas –

You would not have to go outside the small boundaries of this congregation to find all those moods of Christmas; it's all there and it's all made a little bit sharper against the backdrop of the season – the most wonderful time of the year we are reminded often as we shop.

In some ways popular culture, or at least popular music, does give voice to all these moods of Christmas. I heard a song the other day that proclaimed: Even Santa Gets the Blues. But pop culture really has nothing on the prophets and poets who long ago mapped the wilderness and dry lands of our journey through life.

They were never in denial, they never sugar coated the difficulty - yet they believed according to their faith that God could bring blossoms in the dry land, streams in the desert, springs of water in the thirsty ground. And this promise sustained them; this promise prepared them to hear the angels sing good news of salvation: Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

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