

December 11, 2022 – Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness is a dangerous place. It's dangerous for everyone, but it's most dangerous for those who don't know how dangerous it truly is. Every couple months, it seems, there is a news story about some person or group of people who go into a national park or into the mountain or across the desert and get lost. They hike into the wilderness and vanish without a trace.

Sometimes they're eventually found, safe and sound, but not always. And usually there was some easily avoidable thing that happened that caught them off guard. They decided to go off the path and got lost. They didn't check the weather and got caught in a storm. They didn't bring enough water and succumbed to heat exhaustion. They sprained an ankle and had no way to call for help.

One little oversight. One foolish decision. And the wilderness just swallowed them. The wilderness is a dangerous place.

As modern Americans with vast amounts of technology and resources at our disposal, it's easy to forget that. But it's always been true. And, because they didn't have the technology and resources that we have, it's something that people in the past were much more aware of.

So when the Bible talks about the wilderness, it's not just talking about a place that is empty or lacking civilization. It's talking about a place of danger. A place of chaos and evil and suffering. A place that will simply swallow you. A place that will kill you.

Isaiah uses the image of the wilderness in our Old Testament lesson this morning. In fact, he presents us with someone who is lost in the wilderness. They wandered off the path. They have been caught in a storm. They have collapsed in the heat. They have tripped and fallen in anguish.

And in his description they are trapped in a place of burning sand and thirsty ground. A place where jackals roam the land looking for the weak. Where lions and ravenous beasts live around every corner. This is not a place you want to be.

And yet, it is the place where everyone lives. Because this wilderness isn't in a national park or in some foreign country. This wilderness is right here. It's all around us. Wilderness is what this whole world has become.

You see, when Adam and Eve fell into sin, they didn't just make a physical departure from the Garden of Eden. They made a spiritual departure from the garden as well. In the garden, they had well-tended trees that bore every kind of fruit they could want. They had well-behaved animals that came to them to be named. They had perfect weather and a perfect home and a perfect life of order and meaning and goodness. Everything the way that it was supposed to be.

And then they were cast out of the garden and they entered into the wilderness. A place where the ground bore thorns and thistle for them. A place where wild beasts attacked without warning. A place of scorching sun and frigid winds. A place where they would need to carve out a home through hardship and suffering.

But most of all, a place of sin, filled with chaos and futility and evil. Where nothing was the way it was supposed to be. They were cast into the wilderness. And worst of all, they had chosen this. They hadn't stumbled into the wilderness accidentally. They had knowingly decided, "We're not going to obey God. We're not going to trust God's Word. We could have a safe, perfect home, but we choose instead to live in this dangerous, evil wilderness."

It makes no sense. And yet, we make the same choice every day. Every time we sin, we say, "No thanks, God, I'd rather suffer in the desert. I'd rather live with the jackals and the lions. I'd rather die of thirst than obey you. I'd rather wander the wilderness than trust your Word." It makes no sense, but we do it every day.

And God could just leave us in this wilderness. In fact, by any objective standard, God should just leave us in this wilderness. He doesn't owe us anything. He already gave us a perfect home and we said, "No thanks." At that point, he could and should have simply washed his hands of us. "You wanna live in this sinful wasteland of a world? Go right ahead. I'm done with you."

But he didn't. And that is actually the message of Isaiah in this passage. *"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."*

God could have abandoned us to this wilderness. But instead, he promises to transform the wilderness into paradise. He promises to take this sinful desert and make it blossom like... well... like the Garden of Eden.

And the images that Isaiah uses are so vivid and wonderful. Water breaking forth in the wilderness. Streams flowing through the desert. Burning sand becoming refreshing pools. Dry ground becoming springs of water. Nothing dangerous will live there.

It will be a place of singing. Of everlasting joy and gladness. A place where sorrow and sighing shall flee away. It will be the opposite of a wilderness. It will be the opposite of everything this world currently is.

And that transformation has already started. Because it started the moment Jesus began his ministry. *"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy."*

This was the purpose of Jesus' healing ministry. Yes, he wanted to help the blind and the deaf, the lame and mute. He wanted to help people. But his goal wasn't just to heal a few people and then abandon them again.

His goal was to heal this whole world. Inside and out. Heal it of all its physical ailments. Heal it of all its spiritual ailments. Raise it from the dead. And so he healed the blind and the deaf, the lame and mute to show them, to show us, that the transformation had begun.

The Son of God had stepped into the wilderness of our sin and brought water to the desert. The Way, the Truth, and the Life was born in a place without roads, yet carved a Highway of Holiness into the wasteland. A road where even the most foolish person is welcomed and the unclean will not pass over it because they will be washed in the water of life.

The miracles of Jesus show us the heart of God. His compassion for a fallen creation. The miracles of Jesus show us the power of God. His almighty strength to recreate that which was dead and broken. But maybe most of all, the miracles of Jesus show us the intent of God. The goal of God. The plan of God.

Look at what Jesus did in Galilee. Healing the sick. Casting out demons. Feeding thousands. Turning water into wine. Raising the dead. And now multiply that over the whole world. That is what God wants to do for us. We chose the wilderness over the garden and God says, "Nope. If you're so foolish as to choose the wilderness, then I'll turn the wilderness into the garden. And here is what it looks like when I do."

And so today, we live in a wilderness waiting to be transformed. We live in a wilderness with pockets of paradise springing up all around it. For every time someone is baptized at that font, we see a pocket of paradise. Every time we kneel and receive our Lord's Body and Blood, we see a pocket of paradise. Every time we repent of our sins and hear God's wonderful grace through Jesus Christ, we see a pocket of paradise.

And it is our mission to proclaim that paradise to all the earth. Into a wilderness of sin and suffering and evil, we *"say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.'"*

Jesus had a ministry of miracles. We have a ministry of encouragement. A ministry of comfort. A ministry of hope. Of going to those with weak hands, feeble knees, and anxious hearts and pointing to the God who transforms the desert. Pointing to Christ and his work to redemption.

The wilderness is a dangerous place. But there is nowhere safer than in the arms of our savior. His first advent into our wilderness marked the beginning of the transformation of this sinful desert into a perfect paradise. And his second advent will mark the end. The end of that transformation. And the end of all our fear. Amen.