

“A Phantasy in C Major”

Sermon on Sunday, December 11, 2022

“The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.” (Is 35: 1.7)

It requires a lot of imagination to picture the first scripture lesson for this Sunday, especially during a cold and damp winter season in North America. While we scrape our cars in the mornings, bodies shivering in the cold, people of the desert are concerned with excessive heat, lack of water and scarcity of vegetation. They deal with long, unrelenting droughts and must preserve every drop of water that comes their way. I have a friend who grew up in the northern Chilean desert, one of the driest places on earth, in the mining town of Copiapo. He says sometimes it wouldn't rain for two or three years. The annual average of rain there is half an inch, what we might get on a Sunday afternoon. In that desert town, a stream of water that descends from the Andes, the so-called Copiapo River, is what people rely on, as well as underground sources of water. But when it rains in the high desert, it can be overwhelming, and I imagine the same phenomenon that Isaiah describes with such beautiful poetry takes place: the desert blooms, long dormant seeds spring into life, flowers show their colors, preparing a feast for the eye. It's like a Phantasy in C Major to speak in musical terms.

Sometimes we are like the people of the desert, waiting for atmospheric changes that bring vibrancy, beauty, and life back to our world. The parched lands of our times are easy to identify. We have been walking through the inhospitable landscapes of Covid, political divisions, worries about climate change and quite a bit of gloom and doom over the last few years. It has affected even the most optimistic and upbeat persons. We are going through a world-wide recession of faith and a widespread depression of joy. Mental health has been stressed. So, when I hear the words of Isaiah from many centuries ago, I wonder: can we believe the words of this spiritual leader who sees potential in a parched

and dry land, who can picture it blooming again, who evokes joy and anticipation, good things to come?

To me, it is all about becoming spiritually resilient, just like the plants that survive in the harshest environments we must learn to be resilient. Fortunately, we can find sources of joy in our lives most of the time: the blessings of health, certain achievements we are proud of, the opportunities we enjoy in a relatively free country, the beauty of the outdoors, the joy of being alive, the joy of being together, etc. But there are times when it's harder to find joy. Those who walk in the deserted lands of mourning, loss, suffering, homelessness, insomnia, depression, terminal disease and what not... must become as resilient as the desert people, the exile people whom Isaiah considered to be his flock. Sometimes a hope, a phantasy, a dream can keep a person alive just long enough. The desert will bloom again, Isaiah reminds us, even if it takes another two years!

There is another dimension that must be factored into the interpretation of this text. The prophet speaks not only of a blooming desert, which people in those stratospheres saw with their own eyes every few years. The prophet also speaks of more daring miracles: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." It's hard to imagine that Isaiah's audience had seen a person with physical disabilities leap like a deer. Is this just exuberance coming from the mouth of a hopeful believer? Is it hyperbole? Is it referring to some version of heaven?

It's easier to interpret these passages from a spiritual angle. We all have a tendency – Jesus reminded us of that – to be spiritually blind for the natural miracles that abound around us. We tend to be spiritually deaf when God calls our name. We tend to be immobile when the Lord needs us to move and silent when the world needs someone to speak up. In that sense Isaiah pictures a spiritually awakened world, a spiritually sensitive and responsive church, a place where joy is experienced in service of a higher power which we call God. And he pictures this as a place of vibrancy and color. When the church is alive, the desert blooms and blind eyes are opened - spiritually speaking.

The prophet is writing what the spirit pours into his heart. And that is a phantasy of joy, a phantasy in C Major, full of possibility. What would people do if they couldn't dream and imagine things beyond the drear reality of what is set before them sometimes? Blessed are those who can dream! Blessed are those who can leap in their minds! That is a huge part of faith and being faithful. Isaiah placed this dream in the hearts of his people years before they found their way home, out of exile, out of a dark and difficult period in Israel's history. The fact that we have Jewish congregations in our midst today is testimony to their spiritual resilience over thousands of years. They have walked through parched lands and the shadows of the valley of death many times. They are still here, and their dream is alive. Are we as resilient in this time of secularism and church flight? Are we as patient and determined? Are we as faithful? I have this dream in my heart that the desert will bloom again. May this dream come true! **Amen.**